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Museumsinsel Berlin, Pergamonmuseum
Liam Gillick. Filtered Time
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CATALOGUE TEXT

Liam Gillick: Institutional Layers. An Artist's Perspective

The Pergamonmuseum combines Roman and Greek classical art collections – the Antikensammlung – with two other semi-autonomous museums under the same roof, with their own directors specializing in near eastern objects and artifacts from the ancient Islamic world, the Vorderasiatisches Museum and Museum für Islamische Kunst respectively. In 2014 the Antikensammlung closed for renovation. From the end of 2023 the Vorderasiatisches Museum and the Museum für Islamische Kunst will close in their turn for a lengthy period of renovation. It was decided from the outset that my exhibition at the Vorderasiatisches Museum would be linked to this forthcoming closure and mark a final celebration of the collection as we find it today in a form that is fundamentally little changed in terms of its plan and major artifacts since it was laid out in the first three decades of the 20th century. In terms of appearance and infrastructure the Vorderasiatisches Museum also still retains some of its DDR character from the period of rebuilding that took place after the Second World War – the first rooms reopening in 1951, the whole museum in 1953 and the 1958 return of many, but not all, objects and artifacts that were removed by Russia at the end of the war. The notable and popular elements of the museum, including the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way, date from the 1920s in the pre-Nazi period, were central to Walter Andrae's vision for the museum and have remained in place since that time. Therefore the contemporary visitor is offered the backbone of a collection as envisaged by the thinking and theories of a director who was part of the German excavations in the Near East at the end of the nineteenth century but also lived through the Nazi period and was involved in the supervisory process of returning objects to DDR Berlin from Moscow, although he died in 1956 without seeing the museum fully restored. As such the fundamental layout of the museum remains an expression of the shifting values and perceptions of those times with new layers of ideology expressed through institutional aesthetics and straightforward political considerations.

The museum building was not constructed for this specific collection to be seen in this way, Walter Andrae had to work with the architecture and room layout that he was given. We can see this today with the fact that the Processional Way does not line up with the opening in the Ishtar Gate. Barbara Helwing informed me that the gate does not line up with the Processional Way in Babylon either, but this a coincidence. The Vorderasiatisches Museum plan is broken down into thirteen rooms. There is no Room 1 today, so the numbering starts from Room 2, which is now the entrance room to the Vorderasiatisches Museum. The route suggested from an old plan explains the missing Room 1. At an earlier time Room 1 was what is now named The Burial Chamber and operates today as a

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side room off Room 2. It is unclear as to whether this was originally an entrance. According to the plan I found, visitors entered the Vorderasiatisches Museum rooms through the Ishtar Gate, emerging with it behind them. They would then be directed to walk down the Processional Way to get to the start of the planned route at the far end of the museum in Room 2. They would then follow the route in this fashion: Leave Room 2 once more, via the small Room 3, turn right into Room 4, continue through Rooms 5, 6, into Room 7, and from Room 7 turn right into a short lowered section of the Processional Way to see the Ishtar Gate once more, before turning back around and walking up the Processional Way and turning right into Room 10 and on through Rooms 11, 12 and 13. It is not clear from this plan what you are supposed to do when you leave Room 13 and double back through Room 12 and out into the lowered space between the Processional Way and the Ishtar Gate again. While an entrance through the Ishtar Gate is indicated on the map, no exit is specified. To this day, negotiating the museum for the first time causes a degree of confusion and the sense that you might have taken the wrong route or have missed something and at least failed to follow the correct path. One effect of this early plan was to ensure different ways of experiencing Andrae's treasured idealized recreation of the Processional Way and Ishtar Gates from various positions and perspectives. It is my intention to reconceptualize this planned route and create islands of experience that cannot be followed or perceived in any logical order. Each room becoming a museum of its own, focus being drawn to various objects at different times and over varying durations.

The collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum is expressed geographically, culturally and temporally in the following way. Each room houses works from different geographies and historical moments. Many of these overlap geographically as they contain works that represent different empires, civilizations and times. Syria and Asia Minor in Room 2. Sumer in Rooms 4 and 5. Babylon in Room 6. Iran in Room 7. Babylon again with the Processional Way and Ishtar Gate in Rooms 8 and 9. Assyria in Room 10, 11 and 12. And Urartu in Room 13. Each room has a combination of the following display types. Free-standing objects of various sizes, generally with stone plinths. Large objects and relief panels that are fixed semi-permanently to the museum building. Various display cabinets that are built into near seamless additions to the building from the DDR period. Another feature is a series of large paintings of the geographical areas the artifacts were taken from, most of them commissioned from Elisabeth Andrae, sister of the first director. The paintings hang high above head height and something like them is included in the original sketches executed by Walter Andrae and his assistants as an aid in visualizing the museum layout. As such they were intended to have a contextualizing function and solve the problem of the high rooms that Andrae had to contend with. They do not exist for careful study but rather to evoke a mood of a place. A series of places, expressed as relatively empty spaces of potential discovery and enigmatic Orientalism.

The collection we see today is therefore an extensive record of the archaeological excavations of the first director with subsequent additions. Many of these stem from the 19th and early 20th Century and are a record of an energetic period of European imperialism with all the concurrent

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issues in regard to the existence of ancient artifacts in European museums. There are some special exhibitions that take place at the Vorderasiatisches Museum but generally people visit to see the collection. The collection's consistent appearance today conceals many of the historical specificities of the museum beyond the issue of European archaeology in the high Imperialist period. The Pergamon, planned in the first decades of the 20th Century was not finished until 1930. Even at this point, not all displays were fully installed or complete. Within fifteen years this relatively new museum was already heavily damaged by war. While some works had been removed for safety or protected by temporary walls, others were taken to the Soviet Union following its victory in Berlin, not returning in 1958 to a museum which now found itself located in East Berlin. In the thirty years between the reestablishment of the collection and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Vorderasiatisches Museum was a DDR institution. East Germany rebuilt the museum and the infrastructure and repairs made at that time are still visible today. Since 1989 there have been considerable cosmetic improvements and consistent maintenance to the building. What a visitor experiences today however remains the structural vision of the first director within a framework that is its own more subtle pseudo-archaeological record of East German institutional aesthetics embodying something rather difficult to describe, a certain affective aura that remains from a period when the Vorderasiatisches Museum did serious research work and encouraged visitors to enjoy the serious pleasures of a serious and sober place. This is what I have been presented with. A "Museum of Layered Time", marked by historical imperialism, visionary directorship, 20th Century catastrophe and functional Communist aesthetics existing within today's multi-cultural, tourist friendly Berlin. This is what I intend to filter. This "Museum of Layered Time" that feels older and more firmly established than it really is. It did not even open until my Grandfather was 30 years old and its current visible surface condition dates from the functional 1960s to the beige paint and grey linoleum DDR years of the 1980s. The perception of time is expanded and compressed in the Vorderasiatisches Museum. We visit artifacts dating back to 6,000 BCE within an environment that has had a complex and contested past yet feels like it has existed for longer than it has in its current form. My artwork involves opening portals within these layered periods. Allowing new senses to be developed while concentrating as much upon the history and state of the place as upon the objects held within it.

For a contemporary artist to be invited to work in such a layered place, it is necessary to offer some reflections upon the difference between a contemporary art institution and a research based archaeological museum such as the Vorderasiatisches Museum. A contemporary art institution functions as a container or frame for activities and art. Theoretically the only limit to these activities and artworks is the imagination of the artists, curators and other cultural producers who use them. A contemporary art institution can appear somewhat consistent and conservative in what it shows but it may also function in ways that people may not even recognize as art activities in any popular sense of the word. Contemporary art institutions carry the implication that they are of the moment and their role is to reflect that which is taking place at this moment at the edge of art and that which took place at various moments in the recent past at the edge of prior artistic discourses. An archaeological museum appears to be the

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contrary to this. It is full of artifacts which are often literally built into the fabric of the building and while items are loaned or borrowed for specific reasons, the primary role of the museum is to protect and display its historical collection and make it available for visitors to see, under consistent conditions, and on a regular relatively unchanging basis. This interpretation actually masks the true activity of the Vorderasiatisches Museum. Behind the scenes the museum is almost entirely staffed by highly qualified research specialists with advanced degrees whose vocation is related to the production of new research, not just in relation to the collection but in regards to new developments in archaeology and related sciences. This can involve a complete rethinking of archaeological methodology and extreme forms of scholarly speculation and imagination. While many contemporary curators are also theorists or writers who spend the majority of their time researching art and culture more broadly, the role of the staff in a contemporary institution does not necessitate or require research in the traditional sense, such as that which results in peer reviewed academic publication. The main role for a contemporary curator is to work alongside living artists on new exhibitions of contemporary art. Many contemporary curators also have advanced degrees in Art History or Philosophy, however their main focus is the creation of exhibitions or collections. This means that contemporary and historical museums have a different relationship to the perception of time, in terms of what is shown, how it is shown and the frequency with which the institutional displays change. This inevitably affects the actions of the curators, their perception of change and their thinking about the function of art in society. Many contemporary institutions also have collections. In this case there are equivalent tasks and skills to the Vorderasiatisches Museum with specific specializations and a commitment to some kind of "permanent collection" that may or may not include a core of artworks that are on display most of the time.

My project at the Vorderasiatisches Museum involves bringing together a modern and contemporary museum that has a collection and a commitment to temporary exhibitions of art, The Hamburger Bahnhof, with an archaeological museum that functions around the permanent display of its key holdings with relatively unseen research advancing out of the public eye. The directors of each institution have different daily practices and distinct relations to time in regard to scheduling, what requires collecting and how to mediate with the various visitors. A key difference relates to the frequency of new exhibitions. In 2022 The Hamburger Bahnhof listed seven exhibitions or related projects on its website and twelve for the year of 2021. In comparison the Vorderasiatisches Museum listed two exhibitions for 2022 and four for 2021. One of the 2021 exhibitions carried over into 2022. What we can see from this is that the main focus of each museum is different. For an archaeological museum each exhibition is the culmination of an extended period of research. The artifacts themselves are often from the daily life of the time, so researchers have to find ways to translate their meaning and context for modern visitors. Generally speaking, people go to the Hamburger Bahnhof to see new exhibitions of art and people visit the Vorderasiatisches Museum to see the permanently installed ancient artifacts. Expectations are different. Hamburger Bahnhof visitors expect the new and Vorderasiatisches Museum visitors expect to

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find certain key works in place every time they visit. The most important of these are arguably the Processional Way and the Ishtar Gate.

The present conditions of the Vorderasiatisches Museum provide productive problems for a contemporary artist. The initial impulse for the exhibition was to consider how thinking about color in relation to ancient artifacts has changed over time. The Processional Way and Ishtar gate include glazed ceramics, some from the original site and others recreated in Berlin in the 1920s and after. It is arguably the bright blue and gold of these installations that is part of their enduring wondrous appeal for general visitors. Other important artifacts do not show color today but observation and research, including that by Shiyanthi Thavapalan and others have begun to show us precisely how the Assyrian wall reliefs and other related decorative objects were colored. We already know there was color in some form, this because it is alluded to in poetic texts honoring Gods and rulers of the time and also because during the initial unearthing and rediscovery of these works by European Imperialist explorers they reported seeing evidence of color on the objects. To this day there are visible traces of color on some of the Assyrian wall reliefs in the museum. As reported by Thavapalan and others, these traces tend to be visible on the feet of the figures depicted, probably due to the way the panels were originally installed in such a way as the bottom areas of the reliefs were given some protection from the effects of the elements and time.

European archaeologists of the Nineteenth Century brought their own idealized cultural values to bear upon the rediscovery of Assyrian and Babylonian artifacts. Already acculturated to value the apparently pure clean white marble of Ancient Greece and Rome, their belief was that this aesthetic perfection marked the cradle of modern European civilization, once lost to the dark ages. It was a generally held elite opinion in the 18th and 19th Century that Europe was once more approaching a new classical age of art and beauty birthed from the high aesthetic values of the classical world. This was combined with new neo-nationalist folkloric mythologies around early European proto-civilisations evoking feelings of collective ethics, aesthetics and tribal value. The rediscovery of Babylonian, Mesopotamian and Assyrian objects was accompanied by some opinion, especially at the British Museum, that these were clearly inferior in terms of creativity and execution to classical art, functioning alongside European tribal mythology as an equivalent missing link in a chronology of inevitable cultural and social development pointing towards Europe at the end of the 19th century. Methods of extracting and shipping objects in the 19th century involved cleaning, splitting and shaving depth from objects. The idea was to both stabilize and preserve them while making them light enough to ship back to Europe. This process of cleaning continued back at the nascent European institutions of Ancient History. In the case of the Assyrian relief panels a notable feature is cuneiform writing across the front of the panels and on related statues and objects. This writing is usually in honor of the subject of the artifact and or the ruler of the period. Early conservators and archaeologists reported seeing traces of pigment in the incised texts in the relief panel, which indicated they were highlighted against the polychrome surface of the work itself. What we would now consider to be over-cleaning was common in the 19th century and has hampered the work of contemporary researchers. Over-cleaning was

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common in regard to Ancient Greek and Roman rediscoveries. The Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles in the British Museum were cleaned on multiple occasions using ammonia and soap to try and achieve the pure white ideals of the 19th and early 20th century. This combination of 19th century hierarchical placement of Assyrian objects in relation to the ideals of the time, combined with over-cleaning also extended to modes of display. What we see at the Vorderasiatisches Museum today is wall reliefs installed on the wall as they should be, but in relative isolation or in small groupings to be appreciated as important works of ancient hands rather than as elements in larger architectural contexts. There are some exceptions at the Vorderasiatisches Museum, the red Room 11 was designed by Andrae to offer some sense of the ancient architecture. And the Processional Way and Ishtar Gate are architectural in scale and effect. Nevertheless, in some other collections the way of displaying such relief panels is more extreme, involving framed 19th and early 20th century display systems that were intended to contextualize and present the panels as art works in their own right, framed and hanging on a wall, such as those in the Glencairn Museum in Pennsylvania, USA among others.

Time is filtered through our experience of specialized institutions. The traumatic expression of extreme ideologies in 19th and 20th century Europe has affected the appearance and function of these institutions. The way we see artifacts within them today is the result of changing values and approaches that determined how they were chosen, cleaned and subsequently displayed. The insights of researchers such as Astrid Nunn and continued by Thavapalan, has involved the application of digital imaging technologies which can reveal chemical traces of certain pigments. There is no consensus about the actual color objects would have been painted but we know the base chemical components involved in the pigments. There is general consensus that all panels and related objects were painted to some extent and that they would have been part of a much larger, evocative, symbolic and spiritual built context of brightly colored environments of ritual, honorific and celebratory spiritual function. A lack of scientific consensus allows a degree of speculation around the actual choice of final color if we attempt to evoke the polychromatic, affective and emotional quality of objects in the collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum. We also know from various researchers that these objects would have been experienced at special moments in the temporal cycle of the culture. At these times the awe inspiring potential of the objects experienced in context would have been accentuated by the use of lighting and staging, meaning the use of torches, fire and secondary elements of dress, display, sound and performativity that can only be speculated on beyond the accounts left in cuneiform texts.

The Vorderasiatisches Museum is also a product of modern Berlin. While it was conceived as part of the last Kaiser, Wilhelm II's order to construct new buildings to hold Germany's imperial collections, it was constructed during Weimar period Berlin. While there can be a tendency to over romanticize this periods' contribution to art and culture I have turned to two sources while preparing my project which had a more sociological character and proved enlightening on the question of the Weimar period subject, namely the potential visitor the museum. Walter Andrae had studied architecture and it is clear from his work as an archaeologist that he was an

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excellent draftsman and interested in the architectural context of archaeology. This is also apparent from his devotion to his recreation of the smaller part of the Ishtar gate and Processional Way, both of which involved a degree of wishful thinking, architectural adaptation and speculation. Nevertheless they were intended to be spectacular representations of ancient civilization for the new class of Weimar Berliners, the little shop girls of Siegfried Kracauer's journalistic writings and the lively characterization of newspaper work and social relations during periods of increasing political economic complexity reflected in Gabriele Tergit's, Käsebier Takes Berlin. I turned to both these texts as a way to evoke the hustle and bustle of 1920s Friedrichstrasse, close by the Vorderasiatisches Museum and as productive associative records of social stratification, desires and expectations of the period. The 1920s were also a period of standardization in technical terms. My own preferred color system for use in art works is the RAL system, originally developed in 1927 as the Reichs-Ausschuß für Lieferbedingungen (National Committee for Delivery and Quality Assurance) color system. This color system provides a stable way to produce color for architecture and infrastructure while remaining consistent when used on different materials and applied in different ways. To this day we see RAL 3020 on Deutsche Bahn Regional trains, RAL 7035 on rail infrastructure, RAL 1032 on Deutsche Post DHL trucks and so on. Attempts to systematize and rationalize perception of color has a long history in a German context from Goethe to the present. As with Goethe, color perception and classification also has a long connection to attempts to understand and rationalize color as a spiritual conduit. This is especially true in the case of Rudolf Steiner.

Steiner died in 1925 coincidentally while the construction of the Vorderasiatisches Museum was still taking place. New research at the Vorderasiatisches Museum and by Sabine Böhme and others elsewhere shows that Steiner was an important figure for Walter Andrae, who was an adherent to the anthroposophic ideas that were central to Steiner's concepts. Color was the spine of Steiner's conception of a spiritual realm that can be expressed and perceived with the aid of color deployed in distinct ways. Another aspect of Steiner's theories extended to the symbolic power of objects, structures and images as routes towards true enlightenment. Andrae left behind the unpublished *Wesen und Wert eines Museums*, an anthroposophical account of his work as a museum director. To put it briefly, the methodology that Andrae deployed to lay out the Vorderasiatisches Museum was deeply affected by his belief in the spiritual power of objects, and the way in which this power can be activated by color as a carrier of insight and affect. Color was considered a conduit of ideological power and profound symbolic potential when combined with judicious and precise deployment of artifacts, recreations and museum stagings. Andrae created a museum layout full of potent visual symbolism for the inhabitants of Weimar Berlin. The Processional Way, the Throne room Facade of King Nebuchadnezzar II and the Ishtar gate being considered as an Anthroposophic trilogy preparing the visitor for spiritual insight. If things were correctly staged, following a visit to the cinema or a department store, a young German full of the spirit of Weimarish Bildung could visit the Pergamon and gain a foothold onto an astral plane. Andrae the excavator was an architect of desire channeling esoteric power to elevate the visitor towards a condition where, with hard work, meditation, self-

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sufficiency and modest self-restraint they might be able to eventually perceive all the past and all the future in one moment of pure enlightenment.

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