06 2008

# Displaying Postcoloniality. On the project for a Museum of the Living Present on the Island of Réunion

## An interview between Charlotte Martinz-Turek and Françoise Vergès

**Charlotte Martinz-Turek / Françoise Vergès**

The idea of the book *Das Unbehagen im Museum. Postkoloniale Museologien* emerged out of a workshop we – Nora Sternfeld, Belinda Kazeem and I – did for the schnittpunkt exhibition theory & practice.

*Storyline* is a series of workshops we have been doing since 2002 and which, in October 2007, focused on ethnographic collections, mainly those in Vienna. The museological framework of the workshop's content was aimed at reflecting on the connection between the idea behind the emerging museum with the constitution of nation states in Europe. Against a background of colonialism and nation building, the construction of european communities goes hand in hand with the construction of

"Otherness" – national museums and ethnographic collections emerge simultaneously. The instruments of knowledge production in this context are simultaneously tools for colonial governance and domination: they produce knowledge about "Others" who are not allowed to take part in the processes of their own representation.

In the workshop we analysed exhibition and museum practices in regard to the construction of "otherness" and the logics of "epistemological violence" that unquestionably go together with them. We dealt with issues such as: to what extent are the binary logics of norm/aberration, own/alien, male/female being reproduced? What might it mean if a museum was thought of as a contact zone[1] in which different people coming from different nation states and groups take part in encounters that are not based on hegemonic structures? Is the history of the collection—a history which is often connected with violence—reflected or concealed and if so, how? What would it mean if a European ethnographic museum were to install rooms for encounters of this nature? How would reformulating ethnograpic collections reformulate the institution itself? How can the self conception of those museums be dealt with?

For this post-workshop publication we are very happy to have the opportunity of gaining some insight into an exciting project which comes from a non-European context and is still in its formational phase .

CMT: The museum project you are planning derives from a very different background. We are very happy be given access to the concept and ideas guiding the processes of the Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnaise (MCUR)[2] which will open in 2010 as a museum and cultural center on the island of

Réunion. As I understood it will be the first museum built on the island
that is entirely born of colonial and postcolonial experiences.

Could you please outline for us the beginning of the process that led to the foundation of the MCUR? Which groups formulated the desire for a museum on Réunion? Who supports the project financially? It would also be interesting to learn something about the team involved in developing the exhibitions and the cultural programme.

FV: To outline the genesis of the project I have to go back to the history of the anti-colonial struggle on Réunion. First, a rapid summary of its history: there was no native population when it was permanently colonized by the French in the 17$^{th}$ century. This is a very important point and has a bearing on the project because there is no possibility of any nostalgia for a precolonial past. France was looking for stopovers on the route to India: it chose the Ile de France (Mauritius) and the Ile de Bourbon (Réunion). Over the next two centuries France purchased hundreds of thousands of captives on the coast of Mozambique and Madagascar and brought them to work the island's plantations as slaves. Slavery was finally, and permanently, abolished in 1848. France then imported thousands of indentured workers from southern India, Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique and Southern China to replace the slaves. Meanwhile migration produced by the Age of the Empires in the Indian Ocean area also brought people from Gujarat and China. The last indentured workers arrived in the 1930s. Throughout the three centuries of its short history the island has been an intense contact zone for very diverse cultures, beliefs, languages and practices. More recent migrations include Muslims

from Mayotte (Comoros Islands) and people from metropolitan France.

In the 1920s the anti-colonial struggle emerged as the political force that led to the end of the colonial status in 1946 and to the status of Réunion as a French département. However, the French State and the conservative lobbies resisted the 1946 programme of social and political equality and by the 1960s new movements had emerged demanding more political autonomy, the recognition of Creole language, culture and its unique history. Cultural repression was fierce and "Frenchness" imposed – "white was beautiful", the Creole language mocked, its music ignored and Christianity was hegemonic. In a political speech in 1963, the anti-colonial leader Paul Vergès proclaimed that "we will not be forced choose among our ancestors, all of our origins must be celebrated." The idea of the MCUR was born. The 1970s were years of intense cultural rediscovery, re-appropriation and re-affirmation of vernacular practices and expressions. Meanwhile the hold of the French State lessened as it was forced to abandon its most repressive policies. There were political changes.

In 1999, the Regional Council launched the MCUR project. In 2000-2001 seminars were organized with researchers, cultural actors and associations as well with guests from European and African museums. A scientific and cultural programme was elaborated by consultants in 2003, a programme that I rewrote entirely with Carpanin Marimoutou in 2004. An international architectural contest was launched in 2006 and won by X-TU, in August 2007, by international jury vote. The project's cost is estimated at 60 million euros, with 40 million of that coming from the Regional Council and the rest shared between the French State and the European Community. The building will cover 9000 square meters and will house exhibition spaces, libraries, shops,

restaurants, bars, rooms for seminars, events and congresses, interior gardens (no separation culture/nature), spaces for kids and adolescents, a gallery, a panoramic terrace etc.

In summary: the island has been populated entirely by “foreigners”, by people who did not speak the same language, did not have the same religious beliefs, cuisine, cultural practices, construction of masculinity, femininity or the same ideas about power, freedom or servitude [...] They created a new culture and a language that is shared by all Réunionese. These groups have nonetheless maintained their own specific practices and beliefs. The later are celebrated either in public or in private. Réunion society is a unique creation that deserves to be studied more thoroughly. The MCUR wishes to valorise this uniqueness.

For the last two years, I have been the head of a team of twenty people. We, Marimoutou and I, recruited mostly young people. We wanted to train a new generation of cultural workers who would be less caught in the structures of “regionalist” demands, more open to transcontinental developments and who, we hope, will stay, once the MCUR is open. This was a risk because none of these young people had experience of working on a big cultural project. Nevertheless we thought their enthusiasm and dynamism would compensate for that lack. The team works as a collective situated around three clusters: administration, communication with the public and exhibitions. We liaise each week and work closely together. It is important to maintain this method of working because in Réunion the dominant role model in the last thirty years has been the one of a civil servant who has a higher salary and status than in France proper (a legacy of the colonial era). This leads to a peculiar idea of “public service”. To ensure the security of a job the young turn to the civil service which guarantees a lifetime employment and a good retirement plan.

Though there are civil servants who apply the ideals associated with "public" and "service," the system has been perverted and creativity marginalized. The ideals of "public service" must be reappropriated. We really want to construct a project that rests on the ethics of solidarity and an openness to the *public*.

In France cultural projects have, for the most part, travelled from top to bottom. The State decides to built a cultural center or a museum, curators and professionals from the Ministry of Culture are sent to investigate and to write the project, and voila. In our case the project comes "from below", born on the island, resting entirely on the experience of local struggle and the knowledge of experiences in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas and addressing similar issues such as those of the history and practices of the "anonymous" majority, the valorisation of immaterial and vernacular cultures and the processes and practices of creolisation. It is a very subversive gesture as far as France is concerned. Firstly because of the latter's top to bottom hegemony, secondly because France is actually having such a hard time with its colonial past and its postcolonial present and thirdly because France has usually ignored contributions from its "overseas territories". France is at a turning point. Riots in 2005 against racial and social discrimination, anti-immigration policies, controversy centred on the memory of slavery, attempts by the Parliament to insist on schools teaching the "positive aspects of colonization" have all brought France's malaise in regard to its colonial "civilising mission" to the forefront. We will see how it evolves. But when a postcolonial society claims a right to build a museum and cultural centre without consulting the "experts" it is perceived as a very radical gesture.

The project has also been radical in its elaboration of its on-going programme. For instance studies about public reception are usually

done *after* the opening of a cultural centre or museum and they focus on the reaction to what is on show. The public is still regarded as a consumer that must be satisfied despite the huge changes made in favour of interactivity. We wanted to do it differently and, long before the actual opening, to deal with the expectations and wishes of the various publics in Réunion: the unemployed (close to 37% of the active population), people with who are physically challenged, adolescents, children, elderly, the illiterate (120,000 from a total population of 870,000), the public used to going to museums and those for whom the museum represents a "forbidden" space. We looked firstly at what the current favourite leisure activities are for the people of Réunion . Then we wrote a questionnaire. The first half is about their cultural practices and leisure-time activities and the second about their wants and expectations regarding the MCUR. We have held workshops with groups and we go around the island, to each town and village, to present and discuss the project . This interaction is very productive. People get interested in the project. They are usually never asked about what they want in terms of cultural activities and they consider that museums on the island are for the elite, not for "them". In the MCUR project their contributions are sought out and valorised. In a recent meeting of that sort, forty people of all ages, genders and classes were asked to invent a marketing slogan for the MCUR. What emerged most strongly were the ideas of valorising of the vernacular and of emphasising solidarity. In 2006, we launched a campaign to collect donated objects that would testify to the lives and worlds of Réunionese: 600 objects were donated. They will be shown in a gallery of the MCUR as the only collection of "authentic" objects. We also collect oral or filmed testimonies. We plan to launch a program of donating plants for the park, 22 hectares overlooking the ocean. The people of Réunion are deeply involved in gardening. We want

them to participate in the construction of the *maison*. During these encounters we explain our objectives: we do not want a place for nostalgia or a reinvention of tradition, we want to build a public space for exchanges and encounters. As a result of these encounters we have already added various activities to the future scope of the MCUR such as gardening, domino games, dancing, encounters with 'living witnesses' (How was it to be a worker on a plantation, on the docks, a house servant? How is it today to be a scientist, an engineer, an artist?), balls on the terrace, open-air theater etc.

Right from the beginning, we sought support from eminent artists and intellectuals all over the world – Stuart Hall, Isaac Julien, Gilberto Gil, Mia Couto, Youssef Chahine, AbdelKhader Khatibi, Aimé Césaire, Maryse Condé, Jacques Derrida, Abdou Diouf among them – and they were generous enough to trust us. We also have a scientific council presided over by Marc Augé which includes Germain Viatte, Simon Njami and Achille Mbembe.

CMT: Could you give us a short introduction to the planned implementation of the exhibitions? As outlined in the above mentioned concept[3] the exhibition spaces will be organized around a permanent exhibition that forms the main narration and, as I understand it, it will mainly focus on objects? What are the objectives of that exhibition? Which narrative strategy will you choose?

FV: The main objectives were first of all to say, "Look, our ancestors came from very diverse civilizations and, contrary to what we usually learn and hear, these civilizations were highly complex by the time Europeans arrived in the Indian Ocean". Then we wanted to show the processes and practices of creolization. How

did creolization occur on a small island, a contact zone for so many cultures? Cultures arrived as traces and fragments and they colluded with each other within a colonial society and its regimes of exclusion and racial hierarchy. However through resistance and negotiation slaves, colonial settlers, migrants and indentured workers created a new culture, a new language. Finally, one objective was to give an important place to the present. We use the expression "a museum of the living present" to express our desire of anchoring the space in current issues – economic mutations, globalization, new cultural developments, new conflicts and resistance [...] We look at the past *from* the present in order to explore the uniqueness of its expressions and to avoid a deterministic approach. The present dictates our questions about the past but the past retains its uniqueness.

The object of the MCUR is, I might suggest, *an encounter with the Other*. This concerns everyone and includes all kinds of encounters: conflictual, friendly, curious, indifferent, amorous, interested, commercial [...] On Réunion the encounters between diverse groups that met on an unequal footing produced a social and cultural world. Rather than focusing on the objects they produced, we want to focus on those immaterial moments that speak of exchange. This is the encounter with alterity. The "object" is not at the centre of the exhibition. There are very few objects still in existence that could testify to the lives of the poor and exploited. It is the world of wealthy "whites" that has been preserved. France has no political interest in the archeology of slavery so many sites have been destroyed due to this indifference and contempt for that experience. Indentured workers and poor colonists have not been treated any better. We had to deal with an "absence" and, rather than filling this absence, we chose to work outwards from it, to

transform it into a *presence*. Through fragments, traces, bits and pieces, we will retrace the lives of the "anonymous".

The permanent exhibition is called *Six worlds, La Réunion*. The chronology adopted does not follow textbook chronology; it focuses on the transformations produced by the merging of local, French and international events and it tracks the dynamic process of local conflicts and practices. *Six worlds*: the worlds that contributed to the making of Réunion's society and culture – Chinese, French/European, Malagasy, African, Hindu, Moslem. La Réunion: the *unique* society born on the island but also the island itself. It is a very young island (barely 3 million years old, which makes it a "baby" in geological time), fragile, changing. The territory—mountains, hurricanes, ocean—impacts on the imagination and the culture so that the island is a cultural and historical actor too. Practically everything was brought to the island: women, men, gods and goddesses, fruits, vegetables, animals, ideas, languages, practices... The island was uninhabited then came slavery and colonization which deeply affected the ecology of the island.

The exhibition is organized around three clusters that are elaborated autonomously in order to allow for flexibility and renewal. First, the "Golden Age" of the Indian Ocean, from the $5^{th}$–$15^{th}$ century, then the long colonial period from 1498 (arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean) till 1946 (end of Réunion's colonial status, independence of colonized countries). Réunion emerged as a human society out of a history of European colonization that opened with slave trade and continued with imperialism and the migrations it produced (40 million Indians left India between 1830 and 1930, though around 20 million returned). The greatest movements occurred around the Indian Ocean. 1848

marks a rupture within that time-space continuum because it saw the end of slavery in Réunion: from a total of 100,000 inhabitants 60,000 were manumitted slaves). 1946 represents another rupture: it signals the end of colonialism within a larger liberation movement to throw off the colonial yoke. The exhibition ends with Réunion in the "present era", i.e. the continuous mutations in Réunion that have taken place since 1946. Here transformations will be integrated as they happen.

The exhibition starts with the Indo-Oceanic world as it was *before* the island was colonized. The objective is to show millenary south-south connections, routes of exchanges, conflicts and encounters, to propose an alternative cartography, not a north-south mapping of the world but one in which Europe is only one province among others. The ancestors of the Réunionese came from these worlds, they inhabited cities and countries that had undergone intermingling, that were already complex entities. Visitors will listen to travel narratives, tales and myths from these worlds, they will see trade maps, the arts and technologies developed in these worlds, the contact zones of exchange and conflict.

The first "step" that separates the initial timescape from the second explains who the Europeans who arrived in 1498 were in terms of their arms and technologies of violence.

The long period of European colonialism inscribes Réunion into different globalizations, one produced by slavery, one by imperialism. Visitors follow the organization of these globalizations, the resistance as well as the development of the 'six worlds' independent of the West. The Age of Empires and its century of migrations criss-crossing the Indian Ocean: Hindus, Chinese, African, Muslims all deeply transformed the island. Then visitors will witness the fall of the colonial empires, the "short

century" of decolonization, the "styles of independence" and the end of Réunion's colonial status. The "present era" in Réunion will be presented in all its complexity. The exhibition ends with the current issues of economics, culture and geopolitics. How is it to live on a small island in a maritime space strongly influenced by emerging regional powers (South Africa, China, India) which use the old routes and connections or invent new ones across an ocean around which the majority of Muslims live today and which provides the main routes for oil and which is involved in wars for its control.

Two principles of organisation guide our work: oral culture and the public. Oral culture means respecting the role and function it had and has in Réunion and to valorise an important tool of human encounter, conversation. The society also went directly from analphabetism to radio and TV, missing out the book which is a very expensive meduium. Historically the written word has always been associated with colonial power and elitism. Yet because we wanted to transmit knowledge we had to imagine a more oral mediation. We will introduce those elements of oral culture into the MCUR. There will be spaces to listen to tales and travel diaries, the testimonies of migrants and slaves but also for visitors to engage with each other about 'living testimonies' to Réunion's present. For "Réunion at the present time", we propose to construct a place in a familiar space of exchange: the market place. We want the temporary exhibition to be a work in progress, conceived of as a script which visitors add to progressively.

CMT: May I get deeper into the subject of the "object"? In the European context the status of objects in exhibitions still is under discussion. Some organization want to rigidly define the term 'museum' as referring to institutions with collections alone. You

also mentioned in your lecture in Vienna spring 2007 that there will be no classical collection to start with.[4] You have also made it clear that you will be dealing with more of a lack of objects—because they were deliberately not collected since they belonged to indentured workers, slaves and poor people or were destroyed in the colonial and postcolonial era—than with an ever-growing collection. Could you give us an example of how you will be dealing with this lack of objects?

FV: We are not partisans of the sacralisation of the object as the only authentic marker of human action. We think that violence and resistance can  be shown through sounds, images, plays and narratives too. The object is one tool among others. An installation of (contemporary) images and sounds can testify to (past) violence and resistance.

Let me give you some concrete examples. When the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in 1498 they brought with them the violence of years of intense and brutal religious wars in Europe. For them negotiation was not an option. Peoples construed as enemies had to be crushed, massacred, destroyed. They imposed their monopoly on trade in an ocean where, as historians have shown, free merchant capitalism was the rule. How could we show that moment? We first thought of an accumulation of reconstructed weapons and corpses but that was too morbid. Perhaps simply images of weapons and massacres will work. Another example: the resistance of slaves will be also shown through their cultural creations (music, poems etc.), short plays recreating meetings of maroons and rebels, about trials of slaves or masters, dance demonstrations (capoeira, moringue and so on). We are asking young people who do graffiti in Réunion to graph resistance. I could give other examples but the main thing here is that the

object is not the only reference; we work from an installation consisting of sounds, images and objects that acts to *evoke* a moment. And the objects don't have to be authentic. The only space dedicated entirely to objects will be the gallery of objects collected on Réunion: a valorisation of daily objects which have very little financial value but which will be shown as if they were works donated by wealthy people to the collection of an art museum.

British Museum director, Malcolm McLeod, telling the story of the Royal Palace's renovation in Accra, says that the Asante rejected the idea of reconstructing the palace as it once was, of building a collection: the past could be evoked otherwise[5]. I share this approach. Literature, poetry and stories can be a formidable means of evoking past and present. I also think that simple things can very often work well. We want to be creative: we have no "chefs d'oeuvre" such as Greek sculpture, African masks or Chinese ivory but, as I am never tired of repeating, we have an incredible immaterial culture.

CMT: May I return once more to the aspect of tradition and heritage because I think it is a very important issue in this discussion. It is not only that tangible collections are based on the colonizer's remains but the texts and documents which still exist clearly speak from the same position too. How are you going to deal with the predominant European scientific system which prioritises written material? Could you give us an example of how social practices that are strongly based on oral traditions can be strengthened and presented in the exhibition?

FV: First, it is important to show that writing, technology and

science, do not belong only to Europe. For instance, by showing the arts and technologies of the Indo-Oceanic world, we want to say that modernity, science and technology have a history and a territorial extent, that exchanges of knowledge and technology also occurred before the arrival of Europeans. We will show that by using images of architecture and technologies; by presenting an accumulation of (fake) reproductions of the goods exchanged across the Indian Ocean, by showing the wealth and diversity of these goods, by offering a place to listen to myths, travel narratives, philosophical texts, debates, by indicating the complexities of the imagination; by exhibition the techniques of navigation, the creation of a millenary maritime cultural world and so on. As far as slavery is concerned, the organizing principle will be to show the history of this global machine by means of images, (reproductions of lithographs and paintings of the slave trade, slavery and resistance), objects and texts (the reproduction of codes, sales notices, chains, music instruments etc.) and through performances (dance demonstrations, music, medical knowledge, extracts of debates, trials and so on). The MCUR's goal is not just to tell about history but to make us aware of the difficulties and needs during a struggle against injustice and inequality.

I have already mentioned some of the proposals in respect of language. Let me just say that we want visitors to hear the sound of the languages that were moment spoken on the island at any given moment. People did not lose their languages upon arrival, their languages survived and informed their unconscious. Even now new languages are arriving along with the people from Mayotte and the Comoros.

CMT: Developing the MCUR not only brought together a lot of international theoreticians, as you already mentioned, but the

concept has already been presented in very different contexts and on different occasions and has been widely discussed internationally.  You also mentioned a number of different museums which have been of some significance for you and your team – eg. The Museum of the Quebec, the Museum of Apartheid in Johannesburg, the Museum of Grenoble and a number of installations at the Johannesburg and Dakar Biennales. In reflecting on and reformulating the concept of the museum which ideas and theories have been of special interest?

FV: All the work centred on the museum as a transformative public space has been useful. For instance, the volume *Museum Frictions*[6] has provided us with very interesting critical approaches [...] We also met with people and groups, who like you, asked questions and shared experiences that have provided food for further reflection.

All these experiences and work have encouraged us to focus on the economics of our project. We have no oil, diamonds, uranium and so on. We have no palaces, statues or great works of art. We have to take into account a specific situation: Réunion's economy is fragile and there are significant inequalities. We do not want to live beyond our means. We share in criticism of any economy based on squandering and wastefulness and geared towards the destruction of local economies of vernacular culture as "ethno-chic". It would be absurd to build a space that turns out to be expensive and, with the current crisis in mind, it would be pure madness. Since we often speak of the processes and practices of creolisation as a creative strategy for survival hegemonic monocultures, we thought about how to apply this approach to the economics of the MCUR. What will be the economic basis of the project in fifteen, twenty years? Taking multimedia techniques, for example, is it necessary

to dazzle the visitor with high tech or is it better to mix bits of high tech with *bricolage,* to foster an economy of recycling, of reclaiming? Reflecting on the financial aspects has proved inseparable from reflecting on content.

The economy of museums in the "south" is rarely discussed and yet the resources are different from those in the "north." I am speaking here of the *economic* south not the *geographic* one. Museums that have been built in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, China... are huge, expensive buildings. Their architects must be among the best paid and most famous. What economic counter strategies have to be developed? For instance, the District Six Museum in Cape Town has a very different economy to that of the Museum of Apartheid in Johannesburg. The former has been conceived of to house the "mundane" testimonies of people who live in a mixed neighbourhood that was destroyed by the apartheid regime. The later responds to the State's need to present a national narrative. The former uses "simple" techniques, the later more multimedia.

The economics of the MCUR must be based on a reflection of the island's economy considered in the context of its environment and the ways in which the inequality gap is widening in the region and throughout the world. The desire people have for a space where its culture and history are valorised and its present discussed is an important resource. The concept of a sustainable economy which we also intend to be self-reflective (what kind of economy do we want?) guides the exhibition and the programme of the MCUR.

What I have also learned is that people like to discover spaces for encounters and exchanges. Museums of contemplation provide aesthetic experiences; museums of history and culture, of civilization, provide the experience of confronting memories, opinions and interpretations. Hence the necessity, also within the

exhibition space, of offering rooms for debates, discussions and for listening to testimonies or other oral contributions. In the part "Réunion at the present time," we even suggest that the show should be organized around an agora where visitors become mediators and reflect on what happened, what choices were made, why others were rejected, what choices might be made in the future and what vernacular practices and knowledge can contribute to a sustainable economy of culture.

CMT: When I first got to know your project what surprised me was that you used the term "museum" for it. The western discourse on museums is, as you clearly stated, one where museums are bound to the history of nations states one the one hand and, on the other, to strategies of power and colonialism. As Benedict Anderson states, the census, the map and the museum have been integral instruments in the process of colonization. So in the museological discourse the definition of "museum" has a long history with all those implications of power, hegemony, categorization etc. So why did you insist on the term museum as opposed to, platform, discursive space or something else?

FV: Usually, cultural centers are for the "south", museums for the "north". We wanted to break this dichotomy and suggest that a new kind of museum was possible and that a small island was capable of creating it. Historically the museum was a space for citizens. French revolutionaries wanted to "deprivatise" the idea of beauty and art. The Louvre was opened with this in mind: all these treasures belong to the people. In recent years, though, it has lost this goal and all big institutions have revised their position, integrating new ways of looking at art, of the appropriation of the collection by visitors [...9] In Réunion two museums were built

during colonial period and people considered them to be elitist. In the second half of the 20th century three museums opened; one on the sugar cane industry, one about volcanoes, one about plantations. As yet there has not been one that has engaged in reflecting on what the public expects and wants. The new Kelonia Museum (2006) has integrated these approaches and is quite successful.

For us the re-appropriation of the term is a political gesture. Nothing belongs entirely to "one" culture. The colonised and oppressed have always seized what the West invented in order to transform and adapt it. When this is blind imitation it leads to tragic consequences but when it is done within a process of creolising the form, engaging critically with the tools, it can be inventive and creative. I remember Aimé Césaire telling me that it is important to grasp every available tool in order to transform the world.

Telling the people of Réunion that they deserve a museum (with all the elitist representations associated with a space of this nature) is also a very important gesture. Yes, your "poor" lives deserve a museum, your creations and practices deserve a museum. Some of those who opposed the project understood it intuitively when they claimed that there was nothing in Réunion to justify a museum, no culture worthy of such a space. So it is a pedagogical gesture. But once the idea has been understood we don't plan to cling to the term. The real challenge is to build a place that can be taken over by the majority of the population and enjoyed by foreigners who might learn something of the ways in which a society emerged out of slavery, colonization, resistance and creolisation.

CMT: You defined the MCUR as a "Museum of the living

present" which makes me think of an institution open to lively debates and processes which will then be integrated and given visual form in the exhibition. Theoretical positions in "New Museology" and "New Institutionalism" are focusing on the question of participation too, of opening institutions up to different agents so as to reformulate narrations of the past once they have become manifest, of opening up their spaces to discussions and listening to differences. You have already described some of the strategies your team is using to integrate different agents into the process of exhibition development. Could you give us some examples of the processes you are working on?

FV: These issues are why we decided to work with the population, the majority of our future users, right from the beginning. In 2004, we created the title *Zarboutan nout Kiltir (ZNK)* (Creole for "living treasure") to honour women and men for their role in safeguarding and transmitting vernacular knowledge and practices. We established a ceremony where they were celebrated and honoured. We chose people who had never been counted amongst the "notables" of history in official discourses. Some were illiterate, all from very modest backgrounds. It has been a huge success We plan to have a gallery of the ZNK in the MCUR. We are also still in the process of establishing a network of people, who are either "donors" or "intermediaries" between the MCUR team and various associations.

We have also had encounters with artists and cultural actors. We presented the project to professionals, to unions, to teachers [...] In 2006 students (from day-care to high school) drew how they imagined the MCUR building. It yielded interesting ideas about the ways in which civilizations and unity are seen. Many drew Réunion as a nexus of encounters and intermingling. Since then,

we have organized the program *shemin la vi* (itineraries of life) each year. Students work on the life history of a person, an object, a song or a word, retracing the network of pathways and significations that illustrate Réunion. At the end of each school year students present their work in a collective meeting with parents, teachers and so on. It is very nice and often a lot of fun. We work closely with teachers and plan to expand the relationship. This year, to celebrate the national commemoration day of memories of slave trade, slavery and its abolition (May 10th), the MCUR and its partners such as the Conservatory of Plants and the Academy of Réunion offered schools that wanted one a "tree of liberty" to plant in their schoolyard. On each one there is a plaque with the name of a person who fought against slavery, the place where they lived and what they did inscribed on it. Students chose from amongst 100 names of individuals from Jamaica, USA, France, Mauritius, France, England, Cuba, Réunion etc. It was a great success. We wanted to bring many meanings together: the tree which gave shade and refuge to maroons, the tree which contributes to the fight against climate change, the tree as a symbol of liberty [...] Pupils understood it very well.

The main goal here is to weave a network of links between the MCUR and the population and to facilitate the people's acceptance and use of the MCUR.

For the people outside Réunion, we will be using a web site. It should be online at the end of the year (actually, we have a MCUR page at www.regionreunion.fr). A certain amount of information will be translated into the "national" languages of the Indo-Oceanic world: Chinese, Hindi, Malagasy, Urdu, Portuguese, French, Creole and English. We are also thinking about tourists from Europe and the Indian Ocean: the MCUR wishes to encourage

exchanges and encounters, to provoke curiosity about interculturality and to foster the desire to invent alternatives to any form of hegemony.

CMT: These different forms of interaction that will contribute to the exhibition all sound extremely interesting but also challenging. Have you formulated any strategies to help keep this processes alive once the MCUR has been opened to the public? And may I come back to the process of Creolisation again. It pops up in your answers repeatedly and you describe it as a survival strategy. Could you be more specific about this term? For example, for me creolisation became a widely-used term of discourse because of documenta 11 where it was refered to as a process of appropriation, formulation, change and implementation. One of the documenta 11 panels was dedicated to creolisation, did this have an impact on the concept for the museum ?

FV: Keeping the process alive will be up to the MCUR team. However, I think that if the objectives have been strongly contested and then translated into spaces and functions when it opens, they cannot be betrayed very easily. It is really a matter making solid foundations, of affirming the orientation of the MCUR and making sure it will not be subjected to the caprices of individuals sometime in the future. There cannot be any guarantee forever and ever though. It will be a matter of being able to defend the principles.

About creolization: *documenta 11* did not have an impact on the MCUR concept. I had already worked on and written about the notion by then and this is why, I guess, Okwui Enwezor asked me to be the project advisor for the documenta platform on

creolisation. Creolisation is the founding process of Réunion society. If I may reword what I said in the documenta book: Creolisation means a process of loss,  borrowing and creation; bits and pieces of many languages are gathered to create a common idiom and a shared world of rituals and social exchanges. Creolisation is a strategy of survival: in a life and death situation one must learn to translate. If I do not understand the meaning of a gesture, of an order, I risk punishment and death. I must make sense of things in a world in which my own world has been deeply disturbed. I have lost everything that was once familiar, my name, my family, my social life; I have been taken to the other side of the ocean and thrown into a pit of violence. Who do I turn to? Where can I find meaning? Here creolisation is not hybridity; it is about a situation of deep inequality, of forced circumstances and strategies of survival. Creolisation occurs in a contact zone in which people are thrown into a situation of inequality. It is resistance directed against a total loss of language and culture, against an economic system that transforms you into an object or a disposable person. [7]Visualising creolisation is very difficult: how do you show interculturality visually? Let me give an example: there were moments when up to 20 different languages were spoken on this small island. How can you show how they interacted with Creole and how they impacted on the Creole language? People arrived with customs, beliefs, practices: how did they become creolised? You can see the result at any given moment (but five years later it may already be transformed) but you cannot see the process itself. It is immaterial. And some things do not get creolised: contact zones do not always lead to creolization. We see this with the current globalization: people either intermingle or not. People may resist mixing and instead fight for purity. The invention of tradition and the desire to enforce an idealized view of (ethnic, religious) identity can be very strong and hinder any attempt to

borrow, imitate or exchange, or the borrowing is made without any form of acknowledgement that you "owe" this "thing" (word, recipe, music...) to the others, or even worse, you folklorise the contribution: how exotic, how cute!

Creolisation is a very fragile process. In Réunion, as a reaction against years of French cultural hegemony we are witnessing a reinvention of tradition among groups of Hindus, Muslims, Chinese or Afro-Malagasy. These are slowly constituting themselves as "minorities" within the framework of liberal multiculturalism. Réunion is not immune to the vast movement of economic liberalization which advocates consumerism whether in the form of an insatiable appetite for goods or as an insatiable desire for difference. It is the role of the public intellectual in a societies such as Réunion—postcolonial, economically dependent, culturally rich—to say that the model is fragile, that it deserves to be preserved because it represents the ethics of living together, of sharing the world. As I see it the role of the MCUR is to show the "results" of the processes of creolisation, to further them and to accept changes and transformations while keeping the ferment of creolisation alive, never fearing its processes of loss and creation. These represent the process of living together.

CMT: For the last question I would once again like to turn to the question of how the MCUR will deal with visualizing violence and inequalities both past and present. In the concept paper for the MCUR you wrote: "By remaining open to contributions from visitors to the museum even after its opening we are hoping to offer a public space for public history and democratic debates, a space open to contestation. Zones of encounter/contact zones mean people meeting and working in museum spaces to rid ourselves of inequalities."[8] Can you be more specific about this?

FV: We are aware of the difficulty of keeping the discussion going. It is a challenge that we always bear in mind. Our work is already affected by constant interaction with the Réunionese (we have not yet had many encounters with tourists,  this is difficult because the building is not yet completed). I think I have already answered your last question.

In recent years, we have heard a lot about reparations. What constitutes reparation? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is the best known case. Philosophers have discussed the question of indebtedness to others, to those who preceded us. Do practices of reconciliation and indebtedness enhance democratization or do they hinder it by encouraging victimisation? I do think there must be some form of reconciliation after every catastrophe and I also think each group has to invent what is best for them. Reconciliation is the capacity to listen to victims and victimizers in order to move forward though without forgetting political and social responsibility and always bearing in mind that victims and victimizers are not on the same side of the line!. In our first document Carpanin Marimoutou and I wrote that the MCUR would work towards restitution, reparation and reinterpretation: *restitution* of a past that has been forgotten in official narratives, historical and cultural *reparation*—valorising vernacular experiences, struggles and contributions—*reinterpretation* of the past so as to open up the present. I think the MCUR must keep these three "r's" alive.

Réunion does not live outside the world. In the aftermath of decolonization, the end of Soviet Union and the "global war on terror" Réunionese are confronting the political circumstances of our time. They live in a cultural and geopolitical space in which current issues coalesce: the conflict relating to oil routes , US

military bases, new south-south routes of exchange, the roles of China and India, the presence of Islam (the majority of Muslims live in the countries surrounding the Indian Ocean), the effects of climate change (tsunamis, stronger hurricanes etc.) and so on. The MCUR will place Réunion within the network of solidarity, exchange and imagination that links cultural and artistic movements working on these issues.

Let me conclude on a personal note, if I may. For me working for the MCUR has meant translating ideas into concrete things. I have greatly benefited from my previous experiences. They are (not in order): having been an activist in the feminist movement, in the human rights movement, in anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements. I grew up in Réunion and went to school there. I have lived in Algeria, Mexico, the USA (mainly California), England and France. I worked as a journalist and editor for feminist publications and did many menial jobs. I have written on different subjects. As a young girl I witnessed  State violence when it considered that some people threatened the social order – my father was jailed, my mother threatened. I saw people being beaten and injured just because they demanded that their civil rights be respected. I learned that animosity and bitterness could exist among members of the same political movement. I learned that women could be as mean and cruel as men. I learned that luck and solidarity could coincide when, with feminist friends, I was imprisoned in El Salvador during the civil war. Luck because soldiers' interest wandered, attracted by matters other than us just when it seemed that they were considering killing us and dumping us at the side of a country road. Solidarity because Salvadoran women's groups fought on all fronts to get us out. I learned that academic knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge. When I was sixteen, I read Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*[9] and one phrase

stuck in my mind: “those without whom the world would not be the world.” He was speaking of the slaves, but for me, it applied to all those whose lives do not “count” in official narratives, who construct the world with their work and creations but whose contributions go unrecognized. This was how I read it. It summarized my interests: to help make people’s experiences visible and readable, experiences which are usually buried in police or court archives or else totally ignored. I do not idealise the poor and wretched, they can be as cruel and mean as any one else. That is not my objective.  What I want is to contribute to a better understanding of the world, of what mobilizes people and what can be done to contain the worst cases of violence and brutality.
Working on and for the MCUR has been very, very exciting and very, very challenging. It has been, for me, an incredible opportunity.
It means taking risks, imitating, borrowing, inventing.

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[1] James Clifford, Museums as Contact Zones, In: James Clifford, Routes. Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century, Cambridge/London 1997.

[2] www.regionreunion.fr

[3] http://www.regionreunion.com/fr/spip/IMG/pdf/MCUR_PROJECT_FOR_A_MUSEUM-1.pdf

[4] Displaying Postcoloniality. On the Project for a Museum of the Present on the Island of Réunion a lecture by Françoise Vergès (London/Paris/Réunion); Moderation: Luisa Ziaja (schnittpunkt) and Araba Evelyn Jonston-Arthur (Vienna); the lecture was organized by schnittpunkt exhibition theory & practice and eipcp

translate (http://translate.eipcp.net); Thursday May 3, 2007, 7 pm at Depot, Breitegasse, Vienna.

[5] Malcom McLeod, “Museums Without Collections: Museum Philosophy”,: Bettina Messias Carbonell (ed.), Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts. London 2004, p. 460

[6] Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, Thomás Ybarra-Frausto (Hg.), Museum Fricitions. Public Cultures/Global Transformations, Durham/London 2007

[7] Françoise Vergès, A Museum without a Collection Maison des Civilisation set de l’Unité Réunionnaise, in: http://translate.eipcp.net/Actions/discursive/lines/verges (09.06.2008)

[8] http://www.regionreunion.com/fr/spip/IMG/pdf/MCUR_PROJECT_FOR_A_MUSEUM-1.pdf

[9] Aimé Césaire, Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (1939)