

Egypt's Museums XII, Off Biennale: Seeds and paradox

Asunción Molinos' World Agriculture Museum

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A year ago, Cairo's Agriculture Museum was only a Lonely Planet suggestion for Spanish artist Asunción Molinos. Today, a model of the museum stands on its own in a Downtown Cairo space, bearing Molinos' name.

When Al-Masry Al-Youm featured the Agricultural Museum last week as part of its museum series, we recalled artist Robert Smithson's words: "Museums and parks are graveyards above the ground, congealed memories of the past that act as a pretext for reality."

In her numerous visits to the Agriculture Museum, Molinos seized upon this moment where memory is housed in a graveyard, turning it into a subtext that exposes her contemporary narrative.

Molinos' project, called The World Agriculture Museum, is a reconstruction of the Agriculture Museum currently inhabiting an old Downtown apartment and drawing on the aesthetic and modus operandi of its predecessor.

What Molinos' work exposes is a reversal of the national pride incubated by the real Agricultural Museum. It presents urgent questions related to agriculture, food production and food security.

Her often humorous presentation raises paradoxes through an informational attire that brings out an aspect of museums which Molinos describes as “cabinets of curiosities stuffed with various oddities.”

Humor is strategically utilized in the first room of the installation, reserved for genetically modified foods. It features, among other things, illustrations of imaginary episodes of crossing breeds of lettuce and rat, potato and spider, cow and soya beans. The room mocks the earnestness of the Agriculture Museum and calls into question contemporary standards of food security by featuring pictures of rats with lettuce tails, potatoes with spider legs, and cows with bean leaves.

Molinos highlights paradox. The room features a graph that overlays record harvesting in Argentina with increasing hunger. Above the graph, which represents various statistical data collected by Molinos, a sign reads, “Genetically modified foods will double yields to solve world hunger problems.”

Molinos wittingly interrogates mainstream discourse through these different strategies; she makes sure to explicitly expose discourse and invite her museum visitors to think critically.

Molinos also makes paradox visible in the next room, which illustrates mounting imbalances in Haiti’s food production process and consumption. In a display glass box placed in the center of the room are colorful fruits and vegetables accompanied by a sign that reads, “Haiti produces.” In another wooded display box, we see a series of dark brown mud cookies made of clay, salt, pepper and cooking oil. These are accompanied by a sign: “Haiti eats.” The statement pierces.

Copyright laws and their intersection with food production processes are questioned in the next room of the museum in an alarming fashion. In a series of display boxes, Molinos tells the story of how patented seeds such as the popular Basmati rice, originally developed by Indian farmers, are selected. In a manifestation of the ailments of intellectual property rights, Basmati was patented to an American company in 1997, giving that company sole rights to any Basmati hybrid grown anywhere, hence appropriating traditional cross-breeding mechanisms that have been practiced by Indian farmers for generations.

Molinos uses directed humor in exhibiting green grass seeds, the preferred turf for football fields, and appropriates the patent to Real Madrid, Spain’s star club.

Separated from the patented seeds is a clique of seeds labeled “orphan crops.” These are crops that have no global value for research and cross-breeding operations, but have more specific value on cultural, gastronomic and sometimes spiritual levels such as *molokheya*, a typical Egyptian meal. “Orphan,” which carries a negative connotation, is key nomenclature as it reacts to the colonial labeling in use at the Agricultural Museum, explains Molinos.

The policing nature of copyright regulations is best represented by a figure of a cop, labeled the “Gene Police.” Next to him, article 61 of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement is laid out, particularly selected because it underlines the punishment system.

The last room of the museum questions crop diversity. A reproduction of Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the world’s seed bank located in a Norwegian archipelago, in a white salted graving in the wall opposes the museum’s dim atmosphere. It draws attention to how such richness, belonging to humanity at large, is incarcerated in a metal building in one of the northern most tips of the world in parallel with hierarchies of food production and distribution that are orchestrated by the global market.

The remaining corridor features closed doors that carry labels of environment, health and legislation. The closed doors symbolize the opacity that surrounds policies and processes concerned with all three issues. A sign with the word “labor” is left hanging on the floor, indicating neglect. When looking through the peephole of the legislation door, one can spot a typewriter.

This typewriter was used for all the Latin encryption of the signs and labels on display. Molinos pays meticulous attention to detail in her attempt to reproduce the aura of the Agricultural Museum as an exhibition space. Mothballs are scattered in the room’s corners and produce an evocative, nostalgic smell. The calligraphy in use throughout different banners and signs is in retro style. Dust is left visible on the red velvet curtains. Processes are equally on display, emulating another prominent feature of the Agricultural Museum. Along with the finished exhibits are the materials that made them: In the case of the mud cookies, we see a bottle of cooking oil, a mass of clay, salt and pepper.

This reproduced aura, drawing heavily on the agency of memory, attempts to engage visitors with a different situation than the outdated museum it both mocks and comments upon. The changing social, economic, political and cultural function of agriculture in a post-industrialization world is a marker of questions relating to modernity and how it is conceived today.

The juxtaposition of discourses on food sovereignty, food security and bio-diversity, the spelling of affective measures such as humor, surprise, shock and attention to detail cultivate the desired dialectical process.

This process reactivates the function of the museum as a site of production. Besides being a process-based artifact that brought together the talent of painters, calligraphers, carpenters and others, the Modern Agriculture Museum redefines the notion of time in the context of a museum. Rather than serving as a frame demarcating an end point, memory, or past, it becomes a point of departure.