

before 1834) continues ‘to empower locals and intimidate strangers.’³ Similarly, though, we cannot bypass the intentions, often profoundly oppressive, of any of these objects. According to Paul Gilroy, in his foreword to the catalogue, rather than engendering feelings of entrapment, the attitude of detailed engagement which the exhibition prompts us to adopt offers a ‘liberating alternative to the nostalgia and melancholia’ that confounds our understanding of what Empire should mean to us today.⁴ If, by ‘liberating’, he means that these new critical dynamics may somehow free us from the complex and troubled legacies of Empire, that would be wishful thinking indeed.

- 1 Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism’, in Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (eds), *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, Minnesota, 2003, p. 37.
- 2 Carol Jacobi, ‘Face to Face’, in Alison Smith, David Blayney Brown and Carol Jacobi (eds), *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past*, London, 2015, p. 160.
- 3 Nicholas Thomas, ‘Artefacts of Encounter: Rethinking Objects and Collections’, unpublished conference paper presented at ‘Artist and Empire: New Dynamics 1790 to the present day’, Tate Britain, 24 November 2015.
- 4 Paul Gilroy, ‘Foreword’, in Alison Smith, David Blayney Brown and Carol Jacobi (eds), op. cit., p. 8.

Ben Pollitt

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‘Celts: Art and Identity’, British Museum, London, 24 September 2015 – 31 January 2016. Catalogue: Eds Julia Farley and Fraser Hunter, British Museum Press, London, 2015, 304 pages, paperback, ISBN 9780714128368, £25.00.

‘Celts: Art and Identity’ begins with a note of caution. Very few motifs are as evocative of a single people, or somehow as immediate and familiar, as the twists, torcs and triskeles splayed across the rooms that follow. And yet, we are told, their makers — whose identity this exhibition promises to trace — were definitely not Celtic. Before being annexed to a sentimental wave of nineteenth-century antiquarianism, the ‘Celt’ — like the ‘Tory’, the ‘Suffragette’ and the ‘Impressionist’ — had begun life as a term of antagonism. The antique appellative *keltói* emerged as a Greek exonym and was probably used somewhat indiscriminately, like its cognate *barbaros* (barbarian), to describe and disparage any number of Others living outside of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean. It might seem pedantic to point out that no one but the Romans referred to the ‘Greeks’ (*Graeci*) as such either. But perhaps therein lies the rub: no one disputes the Greek sense of identity. In truth, the people we now call the ‘Celts’ were neither homogenous (a charge levelled by archaeologists many times over) nor can they be consigned to a single place, period or power. And so, not for the first time, the lines of Celtic identity are being challenged. Refreshingly, however, curators Rosie Weetch and Julia Farley seem to be in no rush to redraw any of them.

The second room inaugurates a grand pageant spanning most of the Continent, close to three millennia, dozens of national and international loans and more than two hundred remarkable objects. The first, the Holzgerlingen statue (third century BC), an enormous and imposing monolith — a kind of sandstone chaperon — marshals the oldest treasures from Iron Age Hallstatt and La Tène. There is very little speculation about this ancient figure. It is thus, however,

symptomatic of countless enigmas arranged in the spaces beyond and, with its two faces, an unrelenting curatorial tolerance for duality and doubt. The displays from this point on are overwhelmingly object-led. The labelling is concise and unassuming. On objects as diverse as the Gundestrup Cauldron (first century BC) and the bell-shrine of Saint Cuileáin (twelfth century AD) innumerable forgotten signs — hybrid animals, human amalgams, tongues, tangles and tendrils — are thus left almost to climb over one another in search of their own significance. Most of these images are simply inexplicable. And in spite (or perhaps because) of the temptations underscored in the final rooms to post hoc Celtic meaning-making, many are left largely unexplained.

The British anthropologist Ernest Crawley (1869–1924) was the first to note that humans, somewhat perversely, will often reserve their gravest prejudices not for the most alien of Others but rather those — the ‘nearly-we’ — with whom they actually most identify. Freud would later term this the ‘narcissism of small differences’.¹ This might give, if not the lie, then perhaps the immoderacy, to many of the later Celtic revivalisms canvassed in the second half of this exhibition. Alongside some iconic resurgences in literature and the arts associated with the likes of W. B. Yeats and John Duncan, bric-a-brac Celtic tea sets, tattoos and tarot cards are all taken unceremoniously to task. Framed in shimmering gossamer drapery and accompanied by generically Druidic pipe music, these final displays are perhaps thus intended to convey a little of the ‘reverse-narcissism’ of the last two centuries, during which time the small differences of early European culture were artfully smudged into the commercialized services of an often over-

romanticized pan-Celtic project.

The last major survey of early Celtic art — *I Celti: La prima Europa* (1991) — was held in Venice on the eve of the Maastricht Treaty. Prior to that the Arts Council of Great Britain hosted *Early Celtic Art* (1970) just as the groundwork was being laid for the UK to join the new European Economic Community (EEC). Both were staged at times when many of the continent’s ideologists were searching for some trace of a communal identity capable of reinforcing supranational unity. The task was unsuited to language or geography, these being too diverse, but the enigmatic remnants of the Celts — upon whom, as this exhibition is at pains to stress, nearly any myth can be planted — made for a compelling political metaphor. Any witness to Nicola Sturgeon, then Depute Leader of the SNP, who stood pointedly clutching a replica of an old Celtic brooch as she awaited the result of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, might very reasonably ask: plus ça change?

This is an exhibition that rekindles the flames of a number of very old and often very fierce debates. What do we mean when we refer to great swathes of Iron Age Europe as Celtic? Why, moreover, even after a thousand years and more, do so many of us still identify ourselves as such? The most topical question, however, is this: were the British Isles already integrated within a pan-cultural European community in centuries past?

This latest episode in the Celtic saga cannot help but speak to our present, to the hope of a united Kingdom, to the many hybrid identities of its residents, to the artistic license we all afford them and to some currently very serious and sobering questions regarding our relationship with Europe. And

yet, in the months leading up to 23 June 2016, the Museum's silence was deafening. From a strictly archaeological perspective, this exhibition is admirably restrained. In the wake of the most divisive vote in recent history, however, we can perhaps simultaneously commend and lament the fact that an institution founded on the principles of 'free access' and 'mutual cultural engagement' did not have more to say.

- 1 Ernest Crawley, *The Mystic Rose: A Study of Primitive Marriage and of Primitive Thought in its Bearing on Marriage*, London, 1932, p. 124; Sigmund Freud and Todd Dufresne (ed.), *Civilization and its Discontents*, (trans.) Gregory C. Richter, Ontario, 2015, p. 88.

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'All the World's Futures', Venice Biennale, 56th International Art Exhibition, 9 May – 22 November 2015. Catalogue: Ed. Okwui Enwezor, Marsilio Editori, Venice, 2015, 954 pages, hardback, ISBN 978-88-317-2128, €85.00.

The stakes were high for the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale since, in 2013, Okwui Enwezor was announced as the curator of its main exhibition. His reputation of developing, and directing, critically acclaimed biennials preceded him, his best-known and most ambitious project having been the paradigm-changing Documenta 11 of 2001–2002.¹

Despite its title, this is an exhibition concerned with representing, reflecting on and exploring the present, not the future. 'All the World's Futures' refers to Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's

drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920). Benjamin writes of the angel of history being propelled into the future, while its face is turned to the past contemplating the wreckage of history, where the viewers stand.² This wreckage and cacophony of the present is what Enwezor displays, leaving visitors to make sense of the present moment through all the debris, while providing them with what he calls three overlapping 'filters', a set of conceptual tools to read the exhibition, to look through.³

The first two filters, 'liveness – on epic duration' and 'garden of disorder', refer respectively to the laborious enterprise that a visit to the exhibition constitutes (due to the very large size of the display, the long duration of video/film works and the high density of information that it contains), and to the fact that it aims to portray and reflect on the conflicts of the present historical moment. Both filters clearly overlap with the third and key one: 'Capital – a live reading'. The central piece of this Biennale is the daily live reading of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* throughout the duration of the exhibition, orchestrated by Isaac Julien in a specially built auditorium. A critique of capitalism and an exploration of Marx's magnum opus, along with their ramifications, constitute the core of 'All the World's Futures'. The latter is the nucleus of Alexander Kluge's installation of his nine-hour-long film, *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx/Eisenstein/Capital* (2008), and unequivocally of Isaac Julien's *KAPITAL* (2013), a two-screen installation in which Marxist scholar David Harvey explains why capital is so hard to depict in an interview with Julien (the late cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall intervenes as well). The critique of capitalism and its effects is unambiguously present in works such as Im Heung-soon's