

In 1974 William Rubin, the then director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, admitted in an interview that "The Museum concept is not infinitely expandable". He ascribed this to the rupture between the traditional aesthetic categories of painting and sculpture and the earthworks and conceptual art that were all the rage in those days. According to Rubin, this latter group called for an entirely different museum environment and, he added, perhaps a different public too. In saying: "The Museum concept is not infinitely expandable", Rubin was implicitly referring to the problem of the use of the museum as a public institution. In 1977, when the Centre Pompidou first opened its doors, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu prophesied that the desacralization of various items of cultural significance in a desacralized environment with various cultural functions could place the museum in the position of *the* public institution par excellence. Not only would the traditional aesthetic categories be eliminated, he said, but the perverted image of cultural consumption would take a turn for the better as well. The Centre Pompidou too, envisaged 'a different public'; it did not formulate the concept of the expanded museum as a problem, though, but as a solution to the essential problem, the problem of the future of the museum.

In 1974 Rubin could not have had the slightest inkling that twenty years later the umpteenth renovation and expansion plans for his museum would spark off a discussion which by MOMA standards was quite unusual. Not only did the slogan "these collections tell the story of modern art" come under attack – with recent re-installation efforts as a polite consequence –, to increase the visibility of the 'contemporary' should be at the core of the new design, stressing the need for more experimental space. The new MOMA was going to be a heterotopic museum, a new model with lots of unprogrammed space. We know by now that this can only mean lots of space for disparate things labelled as visual culture, under the guise of photography, videography, cinematography and,

of lots of, as the trendy word goes, info-aesthetics. In short, a melange of practices which negate the displays and facilities of the conventional museum. But for MOMA this was clearly something hard to digest. As a result MOMA's university founded a constituent school when recently merging with the small, cutting edge. P.S.1 in Long Island City, Queens: an entirely different museum environment with a different public too. Just as Rubin had predicted.

In turn, and likewise twenty years later, Bourdieu and other adherents to the Centre Pompidou were forced to realize that the democratization of high culture was very much a side-issue, if not an illusion. The heterogeneity of activities at Pompidou had failed to topple the hierarchy of the proffered items of cultural significance. The public was the same public as anywhere else - aficionados of contemporary art rubbing shoulders with library users. Pompidou's recent renovation and expansion plans bear witness to a far greater compartmentalization and departmentalization than there used to be. The renovation undermined the basic principles of the original design by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers: "More rational, maybe as a mirror of a more rational culture" said Piano. After the removal – already in the early days - of the mobile walls -systems, now the public forum was turned into a ticketing hall listing corporate sponsors and the glass front which formerly invited exchange had turned into an opaque facade behind which art and culture are disseminated. Was Thomas Keenan right when he stated in the conference "The End(s) of the Museum" : "The museum is no more at its end than the public sphere is..." ?

Masao Miyoshi, sounds relatively optimistic in his essay "Empty Museums – The Endgame". In it he speculates about the options for the museum of art in this age of globalized culture-industry. Upon a visit the LA County Museum and Moca, both in Los Angeles, he finds the museum galleries...almost empty. The few visitors which he encounters look as if they are

too embarrassed to be there. Embarrassed because of what and whom? Do they not feel...represented by the art they came to admire? Or is there something else? Maybe they felt that the art and their presence were completely irrelevant, irrelevant in relation to the power of private, global capital which in recent years has also taken the museum and its contents into hostage. Prices at the art market are indeed completely disproportionate to the freedom art preaches and strives for. However Miyoshi believes that in such a totalitarian system, there is room for resistance. And it is up to us to give shape to that resistance. Miyoshi is convinced that museums can gain ground if they redefine their role as an educational tool: the museum as a center of consciousness, like not so long ago the university used to serve. Following Miyoshi, in accordance with the fact that the museum is first and foremost a public institution, we need to invent an intellectual museum!

Let us indeed not forget that the -aesthetic! - history of the museum, reflects the fundamental change in the relationship between art and society, brought about by admitting the public into our institutions. Prior to the period during in which art became integrated into social life, there never had been a public for art and hence no museums either. So we owe it to our audiences, to rethink what a museum is, can and should do!

But the layman - and not only the layman - makes little or no distinction anymore between the many forms of art as seen in the museum and the general visual culture that pervades our direct surroundings. The museum, then, is no longer an *a priori* environment. Or is the museum, as Boris Groys puts it, 'the only guarantee for making the difference'? A buffer which generates meaning of otherwise meaningless objects? Moreover, we have come to realise that all the things to be found in the growing number of museums are merely fragments, a small selection from a much larger whole. Every item in a museum space has

The Museum Concept is not Infinitely Expandable?

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become a specimen, a piece of evidence. This is turning the real and imaginary space of the museum into almost a virtual space for both the works of art and the public.

One might even go so far as to say that today the museum is partly a virtual representation model in itself. An illustration of this is today's spectacular, and above all photogenic museum architecture. In most museums - and this goes for museums of new and old art alike - the temporal environment is gradually being abandoned in favour of architectural signals which prioritize an intense experience of the space. The museum and its objects are being cast further and further adrift from history, lost in an over-aestheticized space, not to mention the magnificent spaces envisaged by artists, curators, politicians and businessmen when they turn their thoughts to a museum. Bilbao's Guggenheim, how strong Gehry's vernacular architecture in itself may be, is based on even more such misunderstandings, for instance the misunderstanding that the confrontation of internationalism (read Americanism) and public relations, with a local dynamic creates a rich cultural fabric expressed through the creation of a new museum.

In addition to all this, we must take into account entirely *new* developments, such as the rise of hypermedia, and the boom in photography and cinematography, as well as the wish of many contemporary artists to operate outside the museum. Given the expansion of media and new technologies, as well as the desire of many artists and curators alike, to create utilitarian products which can exist in the real world and to participate in a much wider visual debate, there should be at least the possibility to investigate a new museum model, not only in terms of its use but also as far as its typology is concerned.

A few good examples do exist: for instance Libeskind's exciting Jewish Museum in Berlin or the Museum for Sculpture/Public Square in Sao Paulo by Paulo Mendes da Rocha. Both

buildings, to paraphrase Andrew Benjamin in *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* question display while allowing for display. Benjamin reminds us that Libeskind's building: "guards the question of representation, refusing its finality and thus necessitating its retention as a problem to be investigated, while allowing at the same time for presentations". What has been built, both in Berlin and Sao Paulo, is indeed a question. While those buildings are clearly giving signals of their position wanting to be a museum.

But where are the clients who dare to commission such museums? Does the the design Herzog & De Meuron proposed for the new Tate Gallery at the South Bank in London, go beyond the hierarchical division of space of lets say the Centre Pompidou? What else did they strive for other than clarity and elegance? Excellence? Their and other clients base their greater sense of a living museum, including praiseworthy initiatives for a greater audience engagement, in principal on methods employed by exemplary international exhibitions over the past ten years. An excellent or challenging exhibition model is not the same and truly innovative institutional strategy. Investigating new, institutional models is needed to further develop the meaning of the museum. Or is the museum concept only expandable on a limited scale?

First there was the encyclopedia with rows of pictures on a white wall, dedicated to, or legitimized by, chronology and/or style; now, however, the public suddenly becomes aware of a comprehensive museographic project without a real museum environment. An archive in which everyone and everything relies on the latest information techniques whose common feature is that they are image-text systems. Hal Foster speculates that the digital modality and especially the binary oppositions on which the database are founded are already responsible for the recent phenomenon that art is hiding behind its antithesis: behind a kind of "anthropomorphic fetishism".

In his brilliant essay "The Archive Without the Museum", referring to a recent cover of the magazine *Art Forum*, Foster lists a few examples of this phenomenon: O.J. Simpson, Courtney Love, Broadway Boogie Woogie, Matthew Barney, Prada, Christian de Portzancarc's architecture, Larry Clark, Hugh Grant, Georg Baselitz, Gilbert & George, Calvin Klein, etc., etc. And indeed, it does not seem all that absurd to maintain that the comparisons which sneak their way, cloaked in actuality, into contemporary art shows and publications, are a consequence of the virtual space occupied not only metaphorically but literally, too, by the museum: film *and* art, architecture *and* art, fashion *and* art. Again, the question of greater public access and public interest in different forms of cultural expression figures importantly here. I venture to maintain, however, that this no longer qualifies as a warm gesture towards the public, but that the public itself is claiming its - interactive - rights and is addressing the museum directly.

Be that as it may, it all goes to show that not only the museum divides and conquers, displays and preserves. The museum has become just one of *many* environments, part of a much bigger museographic project being realised in *other* places too, from Scalo Verlag and Phaidon Press. By that token the new MOMA's slogan speaks volumes: "The primary reading of the collection will be interrupted at multiple points by alternative readings or opportunities to delve in greater depth into the work of a given artist, period or issue." One of the great challenges issued by all this, is indeed the notion of *reading*, of the field of tension generated between image and text, between looking and reading.

Art history relied heavily on techniques of photographic reproduction to attract a wide range of objects into a system of style. What might then, as Hal Foster provocatively stated a digital reordering or digital reproduction underwrite? Art as image-text, as info-pixels? An archive without the museum?

For the moment though the museum presents itself still as a photographic-cinematographic space. Current interest in photography and cinematography, characteristic for many museums and the problems they are experiencing, highlights the issue of whether we still know what the museum is. I therefore regard the debate on the role of photography and cinematography in the museum crucial for many deliberations about the museum's future. If we are to believe Walter Benjamin, photography is supposed to have put paid to the exhibition effect. Photographs, Benjamin said, should have stayed where they came from: books, magazines, posters, archives. Today we know that things have turned out differently. Perhaps Benjamin had forgotten or underestimated the fact that the mechanical reproducibility of the work of art kept pace with the duplication of the exhibition effect or, rather, with the curious duplication of the exhibition institute par excellence, the museum. Photography was not only reproducible; it also merited exhibition and was therefore subject to museum law. How had photography to be displayed, and more importantly, what photography? Still confusion abounds. The ontological distinction between photography and painting, the difference between taking pictures and making pictures, was quickly nullified by the museum, for as if they were precious paintings, photographs were displayed on large, white walls.

And what about the exhibition spaces wherein dozens of projected images consume the viewer's time-log, to such a point that some museums consider to hand out free return-passes? Do they *not feel* like white cubes? Not in the least. The only difference is, that the white cube has been painted black. Indeed, has any of you recently visited a museum or an exhibition of contemporary art in which one or more white rooms were not darkened? Funny enough, the architectural program of the European museum of visual culture par excellence, Le Fresnoy in Lille, designed by deconstructivist architect Bernard Tschumi, did not provide enough

darkness. So the building has been entirely wrapped in black plastic, turned white by pigeon-shit! As artist Jeff Wall stated: "The word 'museum' seems to be associated with daylight, whereas the cinema presupposes a dark room. From the beginning, however, the museum claimed to be a universal museum. Such a space has to reflect both day and night, so there need to be dark rooms in a museum. Maybe we'll have to think of the solar and the lunar departments of the museum".

In any case, we'll soon have to come up with a museum-architecture which is time-based, preferably defined by individual time rather than collective time. Given recent excellent examples of information-architecture, think for instance of new scientific museums, new libraries or archives, such a new museum typology I guess must be realisable. Yet, none of this has anything to do with, as Rubin was afraid of, the rupture of traditional aesthetical categories or criteria. It does concern however the question of a museum's intention in collecting, displaying and keeping works of art in general. *Omne bonum est diffusivum sui*: everything good finds its own place. But what happens when these consequences are no longer effective?

Museums are indeed confronted with another phenomenon which has far reaching consequences for their exhibition and collection policies. Much of the stuff nowadays labelled as art, is not suitable for selection, acquisition, preservation and storage in a museum, at least not in the conventional ways. This development has made itself readily felt since the early sixties and going by Rubin's remark "the Museum concept is not infinitely expandable" is now rampant. The effect on the legitimacy of our collections is gradually becoming apparent, at least if we assume that the foremost legitimization of a collection is to continue to collect, to continue to acquire from what is out there. Indeed, certain 'things' are missing in our museum galleries and storerooms. For the majority of museum workers the verdict "it does

not fit in our collection" still tends to serve as an alibi for the admission "we don't know how to coop with the stuff". Such an attitude, adopted by many museum curators and directors, is indeed tantamount to denying and excluding much of the art being produced today.

What would it mean to the museum and especially to the public if the term 'easy to preserve' were replaced by 'hard to reconstruct', as has been the case for hundreds of years in theatres, opera houses and concert halls? The first presentation I initiated as director of the museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was the film installation 'Four Rotating Walls' by Bruce Nauman, a work the Boijmans did acquire in 1970, but had failed to preserve and to show since then. So the premiere and restoration of Nauman's pioneering media work occurred only in 1996. Indeed, serious discussions about play and replay, and hence about an archive's status and accessibility, are rarely heard in museum circles. Restoration remains a technical term without ideological content or context.

Many art museums have realised by now that large illuminated photo boxes, slide projections which are fading in and out, film projections running in loops, multiple video projections on automatic repeat, or interactive computers linked to internet, have liberated their exhibition spaces from the illusion of the static world. Or should we say they suddenly have come to realise that there are static images? Because of new applications of photography, cinema and video, we can now really reflect in our museums on what stillness is. In Jeff Wall's point of view, the stillness of still pictures has become very different, otherwise, so he states, one cannot explain the current massive fascination for still photography.

So, do we need to expand the concept of the art museum? Yes urgently! Do we have already expanded museums, I mean truly different in terms of contents and of spatial relationships? Barely so! Though, there are a couple of

noteworthy, but still neglected exceptions. I am thinking of the Fun Palace by Cedric Price, a cultural center which, following the architect's dictum of the museum as a space of distortion in terms of time and place was to last no more than 10 years; or the small cluster of museums conceived by artist Francesco Toledo spread through the historic center of Oaxaca, with respect for the needs of the local community, its Zapotec situation, its isolation, its marginal life - offering a valuable alternative in relation to the international tourist trade. Instead, most of the new and famous museum buildings only show off their exterior features, in the best case reinforcing urbanistic qualities. In general though museums just got larger and larger or should I say - thinking of multi-branching: they just got bigger and bigger. Indeed, over the past 250 years museums, since the invention of the public art museum as we know it, museums grew 25 times in size. As an average, museums doubled their spaces every 10 years.

Is this because our collections got larger? Yes, but only partially so! Is this because their activities drew larger audiences? Yes, but again only partially so. The incredible growing art museum is in my opinion just a frustrated answer, a failed response in order to confront the crisis of the museum as a whole: a crisis of space, a crisis of politics, a crisis of funding, a crisis of structure, a crisis of technology and first and foremost a crisis of content. If there is no real change of contents there will be no fundamental solutions in terms spatial, political, financial, technological relationships either!

Generally speaking, content-driven transformations inside our museums have been limited to the populist blockbuster-type exhibition, initiated by Thomas Hoving around the 1960's at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; followed in the 1970's and 1980's by artist's studio-exhibitions - one man shows! - in pristine reconverted spaces such as the Dia Art Center or decorative groupings of art works in "ideal" museums such as old castles. But a castle for

artists and their work only! This led to a firm belief, reflected both in the activities and the architecture of many new museums, that what is good for the art might also be good for the public. However, this has proven to be no longer a workable strategy! As a result, one saw in the 1990's the rise of the dumbing-down-mode, visible in many biennials, triennials or new displays of collections, injecting a cultural-historical approach, but merely journalistic in essence inspired by the glossy media. Never these efforts seem to bear in mind the "educational" mission of the exhibition-experiments of for instance Alexander Dörner, the surrealists, Frederick Kiesler, The Independent Group, Willem Sandberg or Harald Szeemann in his early days. And nevertheless, we are quick to admit that the museum has first to reinvent itself from within if it wants to build, rebuild or expand.

Glenn Lowry, when imagining the future of the Museum of Modern art in New York, was eager to state that: "As the Museum began examining its future needs, it quickly realized it required not merely new spaces but fundamentally different spaces from the existing ones.

Or, put it differently, the Museum of Modern Art could not afford to enlarge itself by simply expanding, as it had done in the past; if it wanted to meet the challenges of the future, it had to create a new Museum, one that could provide the kinds of spaces and spatial relationships that would allow it to realize its intellectual and programmatic goals." As the architectural competition progressed, it became quickly clear that the radical proposals of architects such as Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas corresponded perfectly with the Modern's new institutional ambitions. Helas, in spite of the imagination at work, at the end was opted for a much less adventurous expansion-scheme by Yoshio Taniguchi.

Yet, we began to see in recent years the importance of what critic Boris Groys calls The

avantgardism of the Museum. A notion which reflects not only the expansion of the museum on a global scale but also the totally saturated museographic project as such. Indeed, sophisticated fashion and sport-chains, powerful commercial galleries and large publishing houses have just as well become part of our museum experience, or should I say have just as well become museums too, blurring the boundaries between the private and the public sphere even further. The public art museum as an institution became the dependance of the museum as a concept. The museographical project is everywhere, and it has nothing to do with hard infrastructure.

But isn't there a promising critical gesture from the art itself? Because isn't it true that lots of art produced and curated today states clearly that it does not need the museum? So the problem, or the reinvention of the museum, could be at once resolved? I am afraid not! As Camiel van Winkel noticed when describing 'new ways of making visual art': the resistance of some artists and their art against the museum is meaningless because it is directed against a...symptom. The museographical project is everywhere! I would therefore like to say that paradoxically enough today's art needs the museum more than ever, but that is: a completely different museum.

Ernst van Alphen proposed to call this an "intellectual museum": a place for comparison, conversation, negotiation, evaluation, judgement, and dissensus. In short, thinking of Masao Miyoshi's remarks, a -free!- place for education! However, as Van Alphen rightfully remarked, it is true that the museum as we know it is not a place of knowledge, but a producer of experience. Museumworkers do know things, some do even know a lot, but the production of knowledge does not seem to be their primary task, nor their primary concern. Therefore the role of the intellectual at the core of the museum seems doomed from the beginning. It depends though how we see in our museums the role of intellectual labour as such. Take theory as a

praxis - which is the least "theoretical" attitude we may expect from our skilled museumworkers. The making of theory, theory as a theater of thinking, does not have to lead towards mere consideration of contemporaneous or historical references of a work of art. The real challenge, as the Austrian experimental curators Roger Beurgel and Ruth Noack believe, involves creating new kinds of imagination, stressing the other side of meaning, a moment of transcendence, which is never the artwork in itself, but something that may be recognized in its effects, in its capacity to liberate the viewer. It is interesting that these and other "theoreticians" recognize thereby the growing degree of autonomy of the viewer. Or more precise: they grant the viewer a greater degree of autonomy than the - relative - autonomy of the art work. But most of our museums offer no such exiting theoretical circumstances. The utopy - or

democracy - of the museum has been replaced by a humble ideal, instead of offering cultural possibilities we cater cultural services. The same goes for much of the art produced/curated today, resulting at its best in a weak, some call it soft or warm, conceptualism. That is also, says Hal Foster - and he is not the only pessimist - because something went awfully wrong between theory and praxis in recent years: "For institutionally, both kinds of critic (Foster refers to the Artforum critic and the October theorist) were displaced in the 80's and 90's by a new nexus of dealers, collectors and curators for whom critical evaluation, let alone theoretical analysis, was of little use. Indeed, these things were usually deemed an obstruction, and many managers of art now actively shun them, as do many artists, sadly enough".

Only decades ago praxis and theory danced a

never ending pas-de-deux, so it seemed. This happened in the first place because artists themselves wanted to shapen/shaken up the cultural conditions for their work. And the museum is such a cultural condition! The museum and its public are still something to conquer. We cannot turn our back on what Thierry de Duve has described as the aesthetic history of art institutions. Such a history entails primarily the faculty of judging, the right to cast one's vote. This right is not just one of the basic assumptions of our democracies, but of our museums as well. We thus must allow for situations whereby many people should be able to put themselves in a position in which they can say: this is a significant part, move or step in our culture. The intellectual museum would be a big help!

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