

Contribution to *Artforum* series : The Museum Revisited

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I like to distinguish between the museum as a reality *producer* and the museum as a reality *container*, with the museum of the future taking upon itself the responsibility of being, together with its visitors and the artist, a co-producer of models, of reality.

Let me offer an example. In 2006, the management of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, diagnosed a crisis in the communication of its collections to the general public and, looking to an artist for inspiration and help, invited me to conduct what they termed an 'infra-structural reassessment'. I was both surprised and enticed by the fact that the museum would trust an artist with this kind of evaluation. It suggested a new sensitivity towards space and its users – or, more specifically, towards the institution and its audience. My research centred on the embodied attention of individual viewers, exploring physical movement within the building as a vehicle for experiencing art. I considered the ways in which the Hirshhorn, by showing confidence in its users, could create conditions that would allow visitors to see their own resources for perceiving art. I considered the ways in which the spatial and temporal dispositions of the museum itself could aid visitors, moving away from the model of affirmative consumption to one of enhanced user engagement (by now a post-trendy term). I also sought to make manifest the idea that the user of the museum is more valuable than the museum itself. This was particularly necessary in the case of the Hirshhorn, owing to its location on the National Mall, which leaves little space for individuated sensitivity and expression.

I focused on the multiple temporal schemes that every museum should be able to satisfy: those of the visitor with ten minutes to spare, the one with an hour or two, half a day, a week, or even a month. The ability to accommodate such an array of speeds simultaneously is rare among museums, since it goes against the predefined, pseudo-recreational spa-speed and body - regulatory efforts they seem to favour. And yet temporal diversity is a crucial tool with which to amplify the various ways of experiencing art within a particular institutional context. My thinking at the Hirshhorn eventually took the shape of architectural suggestions that included an inclined ramp that would run round the exterior facade of the (landmarked) Gordon Bunshaft building, almost as a time-producing instrument. I saw the building as a clock and a compass in one, with the powers of navigation being the art itself. Through this physical rendering of time, movement, and flow, visitors would be compelled to negotiate their journey through the building critically.

In the end, the project was abandoned, unfortunately, because of budgetary concerns and staffing changes – and, I guess, because of its lack of 'brand potential'. (Topics such as movement, embodied attention, and spatial renegotiation are not easily marketable.) But notions of time involved in the making and experiencing of exhibitions remain a core interest of mine. Visitors' expectations and memories, their pasts and futures, influence what they see; their temporal horizons constitute their *now*. By extending our awareness of time backwards and forwards, we can push the boundaries of the work and of the exhibition context. I can give a few more examples. For a show at Austria's

Kunsthaus Bregenz in 2001, I had a letter sent out announcing that the exhibition had begun – before the actual opening. In Switzerland, the Kunsthaus Zug invited me to conceive a five-year show whose different instalments would never all be in place at the same time, but rather erased and written over, year after year, as in a palimpsest. At Germany's Kunstverein Wolfsburg in 1999, I had a randomly moving spotlight illuminate the construction of the walls for the exhibition space; on the day the construction was completed, the exhibition ended. Currently, as part of my exhibition *Innen Stadt Aussen* (Inner City Out) at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin, I am trying to push the boundaries of the institution, accommodating installations and interventions throughout the city, some of which began in fall 2009. I hope that the fundamental uncertainty as to *what* is shown, *when* it is shown, and *why* will help deconsolidate the artworks, thereby avoiding a strong and, in my view, restrictive focus on objecthood. Exhibition space and time become elastic.

Similarly, a contemporary artwork, in my perspective, consists of a complex set of relations between the experimental setup (so-called art), the visitors/users, the museum (or other context), and society. This quartet constitutes a dynamic model for interaction; all four components are in transformation as I write, their relationships mutating with them. The model exemplifies the fact that my studio (as a space for testing and production), the artworks, the museum, and its surroundings all fold into one another, always already inextricably connected. The model is an absolutely extraordinary temporal one with far-reaching consequences for our ways of thinking about art and life.

Many artists of my generation have fought to claim the diverse potential of art and to articulate new strategies for its communication, even while taking an entirely different tack from mine. Arguing for new forms of contextualisation and performativity, social interaction and polyphonic exchanges, we have celebrated vulnerability, the ephemeral, and uncertainty as necessary elements of society. The artistic explications of things unpredictable count among the most progressive ideas today. Artists have cultivated strong, frictional relationships with architecture, with design and technology, with media, with the social and natural sciences, without worrying about whether they belong to the one field or another. For museums, there is similarly creative potential in abundance; but there is also a great danger that the institutions will go down the wrong alley. Forgetting their obligation to support the values ingrained in the art that they exhibit, they fall into a visionary vacuum in which quantification and marketability reign. Values and trajectories diverge: the museum goes one way, the art other ways. This lack of overlapping trajectories announces a museological failure.

In this regard, I have experienced museums that simply reproduce standard models for art communication based on representation, distance from the world, and consumption. If the museum then thinks in quantifiable terms only, or is forced by political decisions and economic pressures to do so – if, in other words, it isolates communication, education, and curatorial intentions, knowledge production and pragmatic detailing – it fails to build that crucial cohesive power within the institution that reaches beyond it into everyday life, a power I

believe can actually change the world. A power that synthesises and sustains a polyphony of voices, intentions, and possible encounters. Unsophisticated management strategies that unquestioningly adhere to the principles of the market tend to creep into even the most renowned institutions, eventually undermining the transformative potential inherent in the relations between the artwork, its audience, the museum, and society. Such museums try to consolidate art and to render it autonomous and non-negotiable. A simple but for some still surprising fact is that a strong brand or signature architecture doesn't necessarily – from the perspective of art – make a strong museum.

My hands-on knowledge, accumulated over the past fifteen years through my work in museums, has made me embrace some basic ideas, including those of polyphonic space; an enhanced awareness of time and of the functioning of our sensory apparatus; and the transformative model of artwork, user, museum, and society. What follows is my condensed vision for the radical museum.

First, a radical museum seamlessly translates between thinking and doing. In the Scandinavian countries, for instance, there are many people who speak with reflective eloquence, empathy, and generosity about complex social and human responsibilities. But since these resources are too often left unactualised, there is an urgent need to establish a strong sense of causality between thinking and doing. And when I consider which types of systems and models do support such translations, the relevance of the radical museum suddenly becomes crystal clear. It is one among many models offering an equation of thinking and doing. The same goes for progressive art schools: thinking and doing come together in the transformative processes of art.

Second, a radical museum helps generate an intense feeling in its visitors, based on the coexistence (rather than the polarisation) of individual and collective perceptions. Museums are uniquely capable of addressing us on a highly intimate and personal level that nevertheless resonates collectively. This is one of the profound realities that the successful museum produces: *We individually share the museum*. This sharing gives our feelings a communal voice, making them stand in direct connection to others, to society, to the world. I find this extremely valuable, since, in its recognition of others, it admits of respect toward the individual perceiving subject. For me, such respect is ultimately a basis for criticality and for the re-evaluation of our surroundings. Compared with many other social and cultural institutions, the entertainment industry, the experience economy, and society at large, the museum is nothing short of outstanding.

Finally, the radical museum is generous. It strengthens artworks by speaking on their behalf and frames artistic propositions with precision. It cultivates a language based on our emotions that helps amplify our felt experience. It functions as a microscope under whose lens we can magnify and examine a sliver of society. It is aware that it exerts influence on the way we experience art and tries to handle this influence responsibly. It acknowledges that its visitors may differ radically from one another and tries to tailor its mediation of art to this diverse crowd. The normative is exchanged for the individual without

giving up on the idea of spontaneous collective experiences. Other museums spread experiential numbness. With confidence, the radical museum endorses the potential of uncertainty instead of categorising and packaging artworks for express consumption. It doesn't take architecture and space as stable givens, but engages in and encourages ongoing spatial renegotiations. It develops a language and a body to make the entanglement of form and content explicit.