Laurent Le Bon

**Museums Beyond Reason**

Empty museums, undefined museums, criticized museums, outraged museums, but museums liberated and loved beyond reason, to paraphrase the speech de Gaulle gave when Paris was liberated. The museum seems on the surface to be in excellent health for an institution that has existed officially only for two centuries, and certain of them live only through their glory in the media. The reality is undoubtedly more complex. This magical place, difficult to define, is no doubt at an important crossroads, experiencing growing pains. Perpetually metamorphosing, it will perhaps very soon fill the role that was once that of the library, which faces a more difficult task of reinventing its identity in the digital age. The specificity of a museum of contemporary art, an oxymoron par excellence for some, is possibly even more difficult to legitimize, since so many tromp unimpeded all over its flowerbeds (it is enough to mention the internal French debate on the non-museum-like characteristics of regional spaces for contemporary art, the so-called “second generation,” whose architectural projects reflect the very foundation of the definition of a museum). After having attempted to surf along the disappearance of the separation between art and life—think of the conceptual beginnings of the Centre Pompidou, most notably—the museum offers a different experience, and more than ever, a utopia that must be defended.

The banal question of what type of museum people like better is sometimes justified to draw attention back to the fundamentals. The answer depends on the mood of the moment, but it is strange that the most favored museums are often those that are farthest from the norm and the obvious, just as the *Mona Lisa* in undoubtedly not the work most favored by connoisseurs of Leonardo da Vinci. It’s rare to love a museum in its totality and forever.

This crisis does not seem to be stopping the museum’s expansion: the number of museums in the world has passed the 60,000 mark, with a great many no doubt not corresponding to the definition underpinning the “appelation contrôlée” of the 1,200 museums in France. A rapid calculation is sufficient to see that one life would not be sufficient to hope for even a superficial glimpse of these; the same is true for taking in those still in creation. Two quests for the Holy Grail that show that any attempts at creating a model or making any other predictions about the museum of tomorrow are in vain. The few lines that follow are therefore only a modest attempt to sketch certain traits in the light of very limited experience, with the secret hope that in this domain, as in many others, it is by sharing, confrontation, dialogue, and debate that some lessons can be learned. In the tradition of Howard S. Becker’s work on the worlds of art, we must distinguish among the worlds of the museum, though their boundaries are difficult to trace. Very fortunately for the public, this creates extremely diverse offerings, sometimes caricatured as homogeneous, featureless, and bland. Confronted with a plethora of edifices, why is there an admiring, quasi-consensus of the experts as well as the general public on the quality of certain places such as the Louisiana Museum at Humblebaek, Denmark (in 2005, Jean Nouvel writes the Louisiana manifesto, for us to meditate on at a time of crisis in the architecture of the museum: “with insolence, and natural, architecture is in the world, it lives. It is a microcosm.”); the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon; or the Chinati Foundation in Marfa; the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; or the Benesse archipelago on Naoshima and Teshima? Strangely, these museums, works of total art, are often isolated from the great cultural capitals, which is not the case with the majority of museums, 70% of which are located in the U.S.A. and in Europe.

Marching under the banner of shopping existing everywhere, the museum model resembles that of tourism, and seems to be in crisis. It’s so chic right now to complain of too much affluence, of deplorably bad service, of the lack of amenities, etc. We can bet that it is not going to be long before publications no longer award stars and other honors to museums based on their collections (which, in any case, according to most statistics, take up only a fraction of the entire time of the visit), but instead based on the various services that are becoming essential: waiting time at the coat check, cleanliness of the conveniences, quality of the restaurant. Alongside the hyper-marketing of culture where blockbuster exhibitions serve the same function as end cap displays at the fronts of supermarket aisles, there remain certain invincible institutions, paradises lost but not nostalgic, where pleasure and quality are paramount. Among these little-known atolls, in the suburbs of Düsseldorf, near Neuss, the Insel Hombroich Foundation occupies a distinctive place in the definition of a contemporary art museum of quality. It’s worthwhile to pause here for a moment to draw certain lessons.

Under the Cézannean motto of “art in parallel with nature,” Hombroich is, first of all, a landscape created by Bernhard Korte, which comprises one of the first *gardens in motion*. This thoroughly landscaped site is punctuated by eleven pavilions created by the sculptor Erwin Heerich. A walk through the grounds, as it is organized, is a contemporary echo of the sweeping landscape parks of the eighteenth century, dotted with follies and garden fabriques where the visitor experiences a continual succession of surprises, in this case the discovery of the pavilions and collections found there. Insel Hombroich is a total experience, open, where the idea of a pathway is essential, with its pauses and its strong moments, resembling a musical phrase. A particular quality of light can be particularly appreciated in the buildings that remain empty, such as the Tower, which is the pavilion that one has to pass through in order to begin one’s visit, like an initiation lodge, and which allows one to understand the nature of Heerich’s constructions and the museographic principle. Every museum should leave a hall empty in the course of the visit, a moment of suspended time, where the conditions for presentation are displayed in and of themselves, permitting one to lift a corner of the veil that covers the ideological apparatus of the display. A magical and romantic feeling pervades the visit as a coherent whole, a landscape that allows one to read landscapes, or *paysages* in French, from the roots *pays* meaning “land” and *age* from “image.” The majority of buildings shelter the collection, each with its own ambience and events. Civilizations and collections blend together. As in all great collections, there are real biases (against the dominant currents), often surprising, sometimes annoying and disturbing. The largest pavilion, the labyrinth, best illustrates the successive sequences of the arrangement of the works, created with relentless rigor, where every detail seems to have been carefully contemplated (the shape and form of the pedestals, the height of the paintings, somewhat low) all the while offering an anthology of visual collages, such as the central hall, which juxtaposes Chinese and Khmer works with paintings by Graubner. Hombroich would, however, be nothing if it were only limited to works well presented in an original landscape. A set of principles makes the visit unique. Only contemplation counts. Thus, the museum demands time: it is off the beaten path and isolated, the collection is divided among several pavilions (according to the proprietor’s wishes), and the pathways from one to the next are like so many pauses to refresh one’s vision. There was absolutely no question of constructing one monumental building with a colossal entryway. All the buildings offer a sequence of rooms on one floor, with doors open to the outside (even in winter). There are no guards, no labels, no electricity, no temporary exhibitions, no groups, no guided visits, no documentation, no domination. Pleasure without obligations. The visit ends with a meal included in the entry fee and created with what is produced (organically!) by the farm next door…

Hombroich remains an exception. It is much more common to encounter a proliferation of generic museums than specific ones. Museums are confronted with a merciless competition where an institution that is mediocre (in the etymological sense of the word) no longer has a place in a world consisting only of small structures or enormous machines. David and Goliath carry it off together, contrary to all expectations. It is the in-between that faces difficulties. Thus, there are still many museums in France whose entire staff does not exceed three people. The public seeks out museums that are different. It is a European competition—if one wants to go beyond strictly local attendence—where an institution’s image goes all out to succeed. One went to Bern for Harald Szeemann as one goes today to Geneva for Christian Bernard.

Museums seem to be well attended, but that’s often the tree that hides the forest, as in the case of the cinema. Only sixty museums in France cross the threshold of 100,000 visitors. The seventy structures in France officially dedicated to contemporary art (among them the Jeu de Paume and the Palais de Tokyo), which are not museums in the official sense of the term, admit slightly more than two million visitors a year. In France, 50% of all attendance is accounted for by seven museums that had more than a million visitors. Only five museums worldwide create fully half of the thirty most well-attended exhibitions. By way of contrast, the percentage of French people who have never been to a museum remains stable at around 70% (65% if one expands one’s definition of an exhibition) in the five studies on cultural practices conducted from 1973 to 2008 (these were compiled using face-to-face interviews with those fifteen and over). The legal reduction in the work week has not brought along with it a commensurate increase in time spent at museums. One finds, on the other hand, an increase of the proportion of seniors and an alarming disaffection among the young. Moreover, it is worth underlining the very weak cultural democratization in new facilities: the analyses done by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Dardel in 1966 in *The Love of Art* have not aged. The museum is in competition with other places where one consumes one’s free time, such as the theme park and the store. Well localized, with free and easy entry, open for long stretches of time, offering a warm welcome and free information, showing objects that are well organized and illuminated, frequently reconfiguring its displays with a magnificent communication strategy—a department store is not a good museum, but a museum should not neglect certain of its fundamental principles. Was it Sandberg who said, “The museum, department store of the present day.”

Architecturally, a new era is building energy, notably in Europe where we can discern the end of the great workshops of sculpture-architecture (there are currently, however, more than 2,500 museums in China, while there were none in 1900), a death sometimes officially announced, as in France; with a few comet tails such as the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo by Renzo Piano, or the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris. The somewhat sterile debate over whether museum architecture should be designed strictly for the exhibition of works of art or not, is now a moot point. There is no ideal museum. At the most one can regret that a minimum of culled experiences are not taken into account during the launch of public consultations. At least that would have the merit of allowing artists to confront—often for their greatest pleasure (and ours)—those cold monsters without any museographic qualities. Extensions, renovations, creations, conversions—impossible to inventory them all. The failures are easier to cite than the successes. One creates sophisticated spaces with costly, complicated agendas that sometimes neglect the essential, such as the height of the delivery door. What if a dialogue between the user and the architect were required?

Baumol’s cost disease is at work in the running of institutional behemoths, with disastrous ensuing budget cuts, specifically targeted at cultural production. The pressure to produce necessary income from one’s own resources impacts programming profoundly, even if this is not often acknowledged. And the economies of scale that arise from constructive dialogue are rare. Despite numerous attempts at institutional communication and regular encounters among professionals in the profession, a minimum basis of agreement on the fundamentals of museographic production—particularly administrative—remains nonexistent, in contrast to other cultural sectors, opening the field to a terrible law of the jungle, where the arbitrary and differences in practice hold sway in sectors as fundamental as shipping, insurance, remuneration for intellectual work, the relationship to the market, etc. One prefers to stay, without debate, with essential rules, such as that of preventive conservation, which are, however, accepted with surprising universality in light of the diversity of media used by contemporary artists. Think, for example, of the famous fifty lux requirement and of the three-month limit for all exhibitions of graphic work, without the slightest nuance in regard to the media or materials used. The temperature control of exhibition spaces is another example of a delicate subject that seems finally to have freed itself from the ukases, in favor of the promotion of sustainable development, which would not be a bad thing, considering the current assumptions of facility reports. Concerning less material domains, such as ethics, a tasteful silence is not unusual, although one can imagine that a consensus on several basic principles could be arrived at.

As I begin to write these lines, I delve again into the website of Mamco [Museum of Contemporary and Modern Art of Geneva] and read again, petrified, the twelve principles that define the cultural project of Switzerland’s greatest contemporary art museum (it would be thrilling to produce an edition of the founding texts of the museum; in the meantime, one is often struck by the fact that they don’t exist, at least online. In the same vein, the absence of any prior statement by the leadership of their principles of exhibition is just as unfortunate: The Mystery of the Display Philosophy.). The key for the museum of tomorrow is more or less this: “Concept of the museum as an overall exhibition that alternates, in the flow of the visit, temporary exhibitions and presentations of the permanent collections (frequently recreated, however, in a lively and often playful way); a variation in the types of spaces and displays, evoking the history of the museum and different exhibition styles; insistence on spaces devoted to lasting, single-artist presentations; rejecting the use of traditional organizing principles in favor of thematic groupings, often juxtaposing artists of different generations, cultures, nationalities, or concerns; accent placed on artists and on forms of art at the margins of the market and the dominant currents; a marked preference for varied temporary exhibitions rather than for events with media appeal; diversified didactic practices based on a living relationship with the works of art; professional collaborations with local institutions and players as well as with an international network,” and finally and above all, and to make it official: the central idea today, that of a museum in motion, that apparent contradiction in terms, which allowed Francis Ponge to coin the lovely term “moviment” to describe the Centre Pompidou: an institution that can be endlessly modified, to showcase the “present movement-event,” this “game of reflections,” to borrow the words of Pontus Hultén. “The museum is a monument where the future feels at home,” as Sandberg put it. Nothing is more central to my viewpoint.

One must always remember the power and self-evidence of the experience of what is original and authentic. The collection is the foundation of a museum, notably in the sense it is used in the law on museums in France: “any permanent collection composed of works whose conservation and presentation (and not their exhibition) present a public and organized interest in terms of the public’s knowledge, education, and pleasure.” For ICOM [the International Council of Museums], the museum is a “permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” And yet, the collection is a symbolic storehouse, in large part invisible. It seems indispensable to know several relationships in order to judge the renown of a collection, in the legal sense of the term: thus it seems indispensible to know the degree of visibility of a work, which would be the proportion between the number of days a work is exhibited and how much time has elapsed since it was added to the inventory; the same way that that of a collection is the proportion between the number of works exhibited and those conserved. One can estimate that there are approximately 2,000 works exhibited at any one time at the two sites of the National Museum of Modern Art of the Centre Pompidou, out of a total of 75,000; but that doesn’t say anything about the rate of rotation. The museum has entered a realm of the fundamental logic of storage rooms, and above all, of flow. Thus, museums are not rare that have more works exhibited outside their confines than within their own walls. Stored collections that can be visited are often failures. The impassioned model of the National Museum of Popular Art and Traditions—with its equilibrium between a cultural gallery and a study gallery—closed its doors less than forty years after it was inaugurated (one day someone should do an inventory of closed museums). If the collection is visible only with difficulty (how many visitors are there to the cabinets of graphic art even though they are always open to the public?), the virtual museum will play an essential role in this arena. If there is a very spendthrift international competition in this arena, notably because of the rights that have to be obtained to create a site, much remains to be done, if only in the simple photographic documentation of collections that are only partially available and very partial. In France, only a tenth of the works in museums have gone through an inventory check.

If it seems slightly demagogic to question the publicity for a collection, the fact nevertheless remains that it is a primordial question in respect to the costs of conservation, since these items are public property. The Centre Pompidou was a pioneer in rotating the display of its permanent collection, the Tate Modern then having marked out a crucial stage with its thematic expositions. The rhythms suggested by these renewals play a decisive role in the future of museums of contemporary art, with Mamco developing an almost unique tempo in Europe with their unusual sense of titles that open “the space of an aesthetic living-together.” The public needs seasons, cycles. This is not the least significant of the numerous ways that the contemporary world of the museum resembles that of live performance. The history of exhibitions is becoming a genre of its own, it is an important task of the museum, and it allows for a certain lucidity concerning the preservation of its authenticity, given the numerous exhibitions created (1,700, for example, since the start of the Centre Pompidou).

To appreciate works differently in the context of a new configuration which is, first of all, an ideological point of view before being, say, a formal grouping, gives a seal of legitimacy, if it were necessary, to the circulation of works, and more generally, to the temporary exhibition.Following the inauguration of the Centre Pompidou-Metz and of the Louvre-Lens, numerous positive reactions were registered concerning the (re)discovery of mythic masterpieces loaned for the occasion, such as Miró’s *Blues* or Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. “There are collections that one finds again, and exhibitions that one discovers,” according to the striking words of Pontus Hultén. Yet one sees more and more temporary exhibitions that only present works that come from permanent collections (pleonasm?) without that being clearly indicated. Who has not called success the display of a work moved mere meters away within the same museum, thereby suddenly passing from the status of overlooked piece along a pre-established path to that of blockbuster star?Conversely, the presence of numerous works that are loaned or on deposit in permanent collections is not a rarity, whereas some museums are inaugurated without even the beginnings of a permanent collection, or only show loans from outside. The Centre Pompidou-Metz has contributed modestly to the definition of a new model of a *Kunsthalle* by placing an emphasis on the collections of the Paris Centre Pompidou in a subtle dialectic between collections and exhibitions: a chimera between a museum and an art center. Can one make this a reality on an ongoing basis?

A collection federates a group and contributes to its identity. The market and the museum complete one another, according to the formula of K[rysztof] Pomian, “in forming a system that allows individuals to establish relations with the invisible, because it enables works to circulate among people, and visitors among the works.” “Art is your history,” resonates the motto of Mamco in today’s world. Should the museum maintain a backward-looking glance, or should it, in contrast, be in total osmosis with its time? That is the great dilemma of museums of contemporary art. The museum is not always very clairvoyant: it wasn’t until 1975 that the first painting by Mondrian was acquired by a public collection in France: *Composition in Red, Blue, and White*. Against all expectations, the leading artists in the market are often absent from the largest public collections. “The present expresses itself, the past sorts itself out,” according to Pontus Hultén. One comes to a museum to find a different relationship to time.

To take programming risks is therefore not in vain. In actuality, the obstacles are numerous. Self-censorship is a taboo subject in programming. One can only acknowledge how difficult it is to put together shows devoted to a single consecrated artist: self-celebration and self-promotion are not remote risks. At the dawn of this new century, in exhibitions, oil painting still reigns, along with a heightened nationalism, due among other reasons to poor knowledge of neighboring artistic scenes, notably in Europe. While one deplores a decrease in funds for acquisitions, entire fields of creativity remain outside collections that are called encyclopedic and/or universal. The museum as a place where work is visible often becomes the realm of the invisible: due to the scenography, mass audiences (with their standards mostly out of date), heightened protections… It’s a debate as old as the museum itself. The museum forbids any sensory experience, and neglects its public. It only elicits fatigue and boredom. The museum should remain, on the contrary, a free space, and an open work.

To predict the future of a museum of contemporary art is a difficult undertaking, but not entirely a leap into the unknown. It doesn’t happen by adding up predefined functions, but from a very particular osmosis, a chemical precipitate whose ingredients retain a large share of mystery. Even if one could explain the success of the Centre Pompidou or the Tate Modern merely by their implantation in the heart of a cultural capital, the perennial triumph of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has left many corpses strewn along the road of good intentions of the economic-touristic-cultural variety—and notably in Spain: the Oscar Niemeyer International Culture Center in Avilés in Asturias, Peter Eisenmann’s City of Culture in San Juan de Compostela, or Santiago Calatrava’s City of Arts in Valencia. The key to an upward spiral probably does not reside in an unlikely “cut and paste,” but rather in the creation of an identity; distinctive histories; and alliances between form and content, envelope and cultural project. To imagine the museum of tomorrow, there is much to learn from failures, which are certainly not measured only in terms of poor attendance.

Many museums of contemporary art are cut off from the outside world. Yet there is a place for an authentic museum of contemporary and experimental art, a place of enigmatic concomitances, as demonstrated by the Louvre-Lens project, offering a different type of contemporaneity: a museum of the digital age, but an IRL museum, as was, in another mode, Lina Bo Bardi’s concept for the MASP [Museu de Arte de São Paolo/São Paolo Museum of Art] in São Paolo, now destroyed. It’s the model defended since 1967 by Marshall McLuhan, where he wished that the public would invent for itself its own nonlinear pathway, all the while promoting a multidisciplinary museum. A contemporary art museum needs the presence of works of the past, and the perspectives of temporal frameworks. David Walsh created the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, a “subversive Disneyland,” in his words, while The Tanks in London offers a new space in the Tate dedicated to performances.

Chronological borders are sometimes too strict, as in those that form the limits of the great national institutions. Now, one only skims the immense surface of contemporary creation, the shimmering froth of events. One should not limit oneself to a display that is impressionist or formalist, but propose a political act in the noble sense of that term. Does the public come to a museum only to look for a voice of authority, the best? Caution: the concept of the museum cannot be endlessly stretched, according to William Rubin.

The definition of the Centre Pompidou as a vast center for information, exhibition, research, and initiative, which brings together numerous domains of contemporary art, remains current. And what if the transmission of culture rather than building a collection were the principal objective of a museum of contemporary art? A space for reflection and debate, it must be able to broadcast and to formulate propositions, directly as well as indirectly, creating ties with institutions that are geographically close, while maintaining a dialogue with what is distant. The museum of contemporary art should place an important emphasis on its relationship with the world of research, which has often been the poor relation of the educational component of the museum. Make a choice, explain it. Invite the visitor to comprehend the world from an artistic slant. The museum does not open its doors to tides, but to guests who enter into a home. It is a public space.

The sensual approach, pleasure, enchantment, wonder, surprise are the cardinal virtues of the museum. *Against* the museum where, to see a work, one must march past all the others. And *for* the risk of an experience and initiatives that challenge expectations. The museum must remain a “box of miracles,” according to Le Corbusier. At its origins, the museum was condemned, notably by Quatremère de Quincy, since he saw in it an idolatry of the future. Still, not all is about privatization of the cultural sphere, as in Jeremy Rifkin’s *The Age of Access*. According to Maurice Blanchot, the museum is not a myth but a necessity: the condition of being out of the world which a work of art seeks to sustain puts it in relationship to the ensemble, and ends by creating a whole and by giving birth to a history. There is perhaps a place for a *kairos* museum, and for one of the right moment, of the inflection point, of the breaking point, of the tipping point, in a world always in motion, creating depth in an instant and showcasing *The beautiful today.* “True museums are places where time becomes space”—Orhan Pamuk in *The Museum of Innocence*.

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