

THE MUSEUM QUESTIONED

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In a society such as ours, where the difference between production and reproduction is ever slighter, and the typical actor in the post-Fordist capital system is one who carries out intellectual or symbolic work, art and the museum, as the primary stage on which it is played out, have acquired an unprecedented centrality. It comes as no surprise that the literature on the theme of the museum is abundant and that congresses and events are constantly being held to debate its boundaries and its functions.

Work today is no longer based around the Fordist working class, and is now superabundant, as a multitude of cognitive, communicative and perceptive acts that cannot be represented by or reduced to traditional units of measurement. These days, we can no longer apply rules to a field in which work and intellect are distinguishable; they have ceased to be so. This has also led to a rift between production and ethical values, giving rise to numerous cases of opportunism, one of the characteristics of the neo-liberal hegemony of recent decades, which have seen the gradual transformation of the public sphere into the sphere of publicity. The art institution is totally immersed in this general organisation where knowledge and information are factors of wealth. The museum, the ancient temple of the muses, idealised and idealising, has become a space of consumption and consensus.

Emerging in the sixties as a way of placing art in the discursive framework by means of which the dominant social formations exercise their power, institutional critique has not always grasped the new circumstances in which the society of the general intellect and cognitive work has subsumed the artistic phenomenon. Consequently, many of the studies and analyses of the museum conducted are rather melancholic, not to say nostalgic, in tone. They fail to recognise that the museum is based on a discourse that necessarily implies a

narrative fact (the stories we tell or show by means of a series of works, events or documents), as well as publics that appropriate these narratives for themselves, questioning them in accordance with expository mechanisms situated between the two. If we were to describe the museum graphically, it would be represented by an equilateral triangle in which the first side indicates the narratives, the second, the intermediation structures, and the third, the publics. Studies and theories about narrative structures and mechanisms abound. However, no convincing theory of publics and education has yet been presented. This may serve to explain the pessimism of some recently published essays. They analyse artists' proposals and exhibition formats, but not what it is exactly that constitutes the specific pragmatics of the museum.

Today, the museum is a place that generates new forms of sociability. If, rather than a place of control and exclusion, we want it to be a democratic space, its laws must be shared by everyone who visits them. Hence the imperious need to move from a modern archaeology of knowledge to a postmodern praxis – that is, to gain an understanding of the comprehensive scope of the museum as a discursive phenomenon in its own right, its place in today's society and the resistance models it can offer.

This approach presents us with two models. The first might be regarded as that of the modern museum, which emerged in the twenties and thirties, peaked after the Second World War and reached crisis point in the seventies. The second is the type of museum that began to thrive in the eighties, with globalisation and the emergence of culture as spectacle. This model is actually an evolution of the first, in the same way that the postmodern condition is both the consequence and the further development of Fordism.

We begin with the museum of modern art, particularly embodied by New York's MoMA during the period in which it represented the essential issues of the modern age and supplied the model for many arts centres. What were its narratives? What form did they take? How were they conveyed? What was their target public?

As countless specialists have observed, its narratives were historicist in nature, set within a continuous chronological development that charted its course as an infinite return to origins and therefore tended to conceal any incompatibilities.

This was a linear, evolutionist history that began with Post-Impressionism, continued with Cubism and Surrealism, and ended with the dawn of Abstract Expressionism and the painting of the late fifties. It was quite certainly an exclusive narrative. Anything that digressed from the task of achieving a series of given formal objectives was considered primitive, derivative or directly insignificant. The progression of art aimed to achieve the purity of the artistic species, and anything that hindered this end was considered defective. This segregation applied not only to the art of other cultures or geographical areas, but also to other disciplines. This takes us across the board to the theatre and literature, two of the great anathemas of modernity. The artwork is autonomous, and the system it produces tends to universalise and, ultimately, psychologise knowledge. The modern museum saw to it that the shortest possible distance existed between thought and speech – that is, that the act of passage appeared solely as a link between the two, with thought constituting a truth clothed in signs and rendered visible by words.

The way in which these narratives were transmitted to the public was based on transparency and immediacy. It could not be otherwise, since the spectator was faced with immanent truths. If we were capable of removing everything that could obstruct our view, if we were to present art with total transparency and without interference, the significance of it, its *reality*, would be apprehended automatically by the spectator, who would then become a passive factor. The white cube or, rather, the idea of it, was the appropriate architecture for this type of work, and a form of pedagogy founded on access was its educational method. This was André Malraux's understanding when, in 1947, he published his imaginary museum. Malraux decontextualised the artistic object with a view to determining its meaning by juxtaposing photographic details. All the issues relating to history and context gave way to visuality and were subordinate to style. In this museum of the imagination, rather than being evidence of the past or of what has been, photography was used to abstract objects from their surroundings and create a uniform, seamless continuum. 'They [the objects] have lost their colours, textures and relative dimensions... each one, in short, has lost practically everything that was specific to it – except the common style, which is what thereby gains by far the most.'¹ Art moves from a real

¹ André Malraux, *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004, p. 212.

to an ideal world where images exist freed of the material reality of objects and actions.

Western culture has emphasised sight over the other senses and annulled any phenomenological aspect. The stance adopted by Malraux is, in fact, a metaphor. We are dealing not with vision, but with an idea of it, as the idealist vision is not authentic. This would be possible only if any kind of representative mediation had disappeared, if we were to address the self-present, the identical, that which is, always. But we know that this is impossible, since we cannot rid ourselves of the mediation of language.² Our only act of freedom is to recontextualise and reconfigure what has already been said. Further, our expressions do not always correspond with what they are trying to say. This is why the notion of spectator has been so insignificant for the modern museum, and the reason why the relation between the spectator, his space and time, and the work has not been analysed adequately: it has simply not existed, in the absence of a separation between the world and that which spectators thought they were seeing. There was no translation. It was a de-individualised gaze that denied appearances, beyond time and space, and was total and complete, also denying particularity and diversity.

The radical critique of the prevalence of this viewpoint erupted systematically in the second half of the twentieth century, a foremost role being taken by Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers with his *Peintures littéraires* and, above all, his fictitious museum, founded in 1968. In one of his manifestations, which took place in 1972 at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, Broodthaers presented 266 objects representing eagles, on loan from 43 'real' museums and numerous private collections. In age, these objects ranged from the Oligocene to the present. Exhibited in display cases or hung on the walls, or placed on shelves, each object was accompanied by a caption that read: 'This is not a work of art.' This formula, which Broodthaers obtained by uniting two conflicting concepts (one provided by René Magritte: any work of art forms part of a sign system that is a construction; the other deriving from Marcel Duchamp: the choice of an object as a work of art is arbitrary and its meaning is determined by the actual discourse in which it is set), was used to completely oppose cultural history and, taking the eagle as a model, to manifest its

² Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 2.

contextual nature. The 'eagle' collection defies integration into a new system, thereby revealing its artificiality. 'The concept of the exhibition,' wrote Broodthaers, 'is based on the identity of the eagle as idea and of art as idea.' But the result of the 'eagle as idea' is, in this case, such a vast range of objects (from paintings to comic strips, from fossils to typewriters, from ethnographic objects to logotypes) that, like Borges's mythical library, they can only be brought together in the discourse.³ As in the case of the Argentine writer, what it did was to question the bases underlying this juxtaposition, which is revealed to be discursive and dependent on various historic paradigms. By means of his ready-mades, Duchamp made us see that the function of the museum consisted in declaring that the objects housed within were art. Broodthaers's captions extend this proposal. By stating, 'This is not a work of art,' the designation of any other object as art becomes arbitrary, mere representation.

The idea of the museum as a neutral receptacle in which are laid out a series of works that are perceived by the public without interference is rather utopian. An exhibition consists of an intersection of text, practice and place. And it is precisely at this juncture, in this intertextual network, that the work of art takes its place. We could say simply that an exhibition is, on the one hand, a discursive practice that includes the evaluation, selection and organisation of a series of works that are shown in galleries and museums. On the other, it is a system of meanings comprising a group of statements or expressions: that of the works. These meanings are simultaneously 'trapped' by the exhibition's titles, categories and comments, and 'freed' and disseminated by means of the actual process that organises them. Nor should we forget that an exhibition takes place in a fundamentally open space-time arrangement, in which the spectator can follow an argument, or stop and go back as and when he considers fit.

An exhibition can never be read as a single text. There is a whole series of implicit texts that have to be brought out in the exhibition, which thereby, in relation to the artwork, becomes a kind of paratext. The museum or gallery, its history, collection and building, the way the objects are exhibited, the captions and the way the layout is organised all form part of the 'message' that the spectator takes away with him when he visits a show. They also constitute the baggage with which the spectator enters the museum. The museum's role as an

3 Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993.

index – that is, as an indicator that an object is a work of art – and its active part in the discourse of an exhibition cannot be denied. The artwork is not conceived as a closed book with a complete universal truth, but as an open reality with a network of meanings that is set within the context of the exhibition.

Museums certainly have a historical dimension that makes them respond to the social conditions of the time. They form part of a power structure that generates and masks given relations between individuals and social groups. As Gilles Deleuze might say, commenting on Foucault, power is exercised rather than held. Power not only acts by means of ideology, it also creates it. The discourse is not solely the translation of conflicts and systems of domination, it is also the medium for and by means of which it is striving. The discourse is linked to desire and power, and the principles of exclusion of the discourse that serve to obtain this power are well known. On the one hand, there are those that are external to the actual discourse, such as the separation between madness and reason, or lies and truth. These are based on an institutional framework: schools, libraries, laboratories, etc. Then there are the internal principles: analysis, which limits the random nature of interpretation, and norms, which shape the disciplines and the conditions of use of the text.

One of the corollaries of the enlightened ideas underpinning the present-day museum was that education in itself could be a motive for change and improvement. However, it is impossible for the universal knowledge that corroborates a rule and a given power to also serve to overthrow them. By showcasing the products of specific historical moments in a single continuum, the museum fetishises them, thereby increasing, to quote Walter Benjamin, ‘the burden of the treasures that are piled up on humanity’s back. But it does not give mankind the strength to shake them off, so as to get its hands on them.’ The museum thereby serves to reinforce the established order, eliminating any possibility of otherness.

While seeking to universalise a homogenising history, the belief was that the museum should comprise neutral spaces that did not interfere with the artwork: four walls, overhead lighting and two doors, one for people coming in and the other for those going out. The building and the works it houses are thereby separated from the city of which they form part, the process is suppressed and, despite vaunting objectivity, they respond to a given power structure. When

the MoMA was remodelled in the mid-eighties, it was decided that the rooms housing the permanent collection should be of an intimate scale, not so much because this was more neutral, but because it promoted an idea of modern art that corresponded to the private collection. William Rubin, then director of the department of painting and sculpture, said: 'Retaining the spirit of the old museum particularly means keeping the intimate spaces that depend on a rather low ceiling, not much higher than that of an apartment, and restricted volumes. We might also consider whether, even in the case of large paintings (and some of those by Monet, Pollock and Rothko are considerable), they should be exhibited in small rooms. To which the answer is yes... Whereas Renaissance or baroque art is public art, produced for churches or palaces..., after Manet and the Impressionists we are dealing with a more private art. The paintings are intended for artists' studios or, most especially, for the apartments of enthusiasts [and collectors].'⁴

While Broodthaers revealed the discursive nature of the museum, other artists such as Hans Haacke also questioned its idealistic condition. As far back as 1963–65, with his *Condensation Cube*, Haacke addressed the material reality of the gallery walls that 'frame' the artwork. The effect of condensation on a transparent cube rendered visible what the gallery sought to conceal: its walls and limits. At the same time, however, this work introduced something that was to become very important in his subsequent work: the real-time process. The museum ceased to be an ivory tower to become part of reality. In a piece produced six years later, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), Haacke placed on show in a museum a body of 'information' (the list of real-estate holdings of the Shapolsky family) that blurred the line between the art world and the 'exterior'. The story goes that this work was censored by Thomas Messer, then director of the Guggenheim Museum, because Shapolsky was supposedly a museum trustee. What Messer considered intolerable, however, was the inclusion of a document in a place reserved exclusively for ideas. Haacke made an issue of the gallery's autonomy and neutrality. The separation between the space of the street and the museum ideal was completely reformulated.

There is a long list of artists whose work has not found an appropriate place in the modern institution and whose aesthetic perception was reduced almost

⁴ Quoted in Thomas West, 'Circé dans les Musées – Réflexions sur sept nouveaux musées en Europe et aux États-Unis,' *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, 17–18, 1 March 1986.

exclusively to the visitor wandering around the rooms. There was until very recently no place for either Lygia Clark's therapy or Krzysztof Wodiczko's anti-utopian design. The need for a new approach was evident. The non-stop construction of new museums and arts centres in recent years, and all the trends embracing other cultures, which became known as multiculturalism, provided further corroboration.

The exclusive conception of the museum of modern art has been replaced in recent years by another, apparently inclusive one that still lacks any real dialogue with the Other. The universal subject reappeared, not rejecting difference, but annulling it. Whereas previously it was difficult to see, say, Cézanne and Atget together, now it became habitual to find the French artist alongside Rineke Dijkstra, or Matisse next to Marlene Dumas, despite the fact that they have nothing in common. Any attempt at comparison is cancelled out from the outset by the totality of the approach, and the pedagogical practice is not merely questioned, it is actually concealed by the purely formal diversity of the contents. Panofsky's pseudomorphosis has never been so widespread.

Organising exhibitions or collections without taking into account the role of the institution in the society of which it forms part can easily produce the opposite results to those hoped for: rather than transforming our environment, it reinforces the *status quo*. Miami's Margulies Collection is an obvious example. Its works are of a radical bent: photographs of social and political content, Thomas Hirschhorn's return to a culture of waste materials, transgression and gender in Paul McCarthy, etc. The collection is massive, laid out like a warehouse (its public space was once termed 'storage'); yet ultimately, in organisation it is an imitation of what we can experience at the Art Basel Miami Beach. This very common stance is cynical and doubly conformist, in that its subordination to power and the market is clothed in modernity and rebellion. Multiculturalism and modish cultural studies have merely represented a manifestation of this false openness that responds to an economy of multinationals, where consensus has replaced the political act seen as antagonism and negotiation.

The process of globalisation is more strongly in force today than ever. More than in any other period, the flows of capital have acquired a global dimension and determined our perception of the world and the way it is

organised. But this is not a new phenomenon: late twentieth-century globalisation is, after all, a continuation of nineteenth-century colonialism. Today, like a hundred years ago, capitalism's voracious conquest of new places for production and consumption continues unbounded. Now, however, the conquered territories are no longer the remote continents that Conrad and Kipling described; they are the space where we live out our private lives, our space of freedom and creation. As the geographical horizons of expansion dwindled, life itself emerged as a whole new vein to be mined. The extraction of formulas for the production and consumption of life experiences in their various manifestations has in recent decades been a fundamental objective for capitalism, as well as motive for ambiguity. On the one hand, in order to meet its ends, it has to promote research, which has increased the possibility of improving life. On the other, the focus of capitalism is not life, but investment, promotion and commercialisation with the aim of generating capital. Singular forms of subjectivisation are encouraged, but only in order to reproduce them, segregating them from their connection with life and transforming them into merchandise, or what Suely Rolnik would call *prêt-à-porter* identities.

To what system of functioning does the museum respond? What are the mechanisms governing it? Does the fact that it is immersed in a broader political organisation mean that its activity merely contributes to its consolidation? For example, there is no concealing the fact that despite what can only be supposed to be the best efforts of those in charge, some of our institutions promote a degree of instability in the workplace. A museum cannot act politically without being aware of its own position as a prime nucleus of social reproduction and a revitalising agent of districts and tourist attraction. In this context, it is logical that the space of intermediation (side b of the triangle), unlike the case of the modern museum, should be based not on access, but on labelling and marketing. The public's needs are created by media campaigns, but the idea is that this public should re-cognise the artwork or, rather, an interchangeable image of the artwork. We are presented with an out-and-out aesthetic of silence, which, as J. G. Ballard tells us, ultimately turns into 'selective madness', a form of self-inflicted authoritarianism, which, despite being manifestly

different, has parallels with the fascism of other times. Now, as then, we are faced with a culture of oblivion, in which there is no censure because everything is consumable: 'At the cash desk there is no yesterday, no history to be relived, only an intense transactional present.'⁵

The danger facing us lies in an order that tends to simplify singularity, depriving individuals of their psychical specificity. In our society, the human being runs the risk of being trivialised. Everyone seems to adapt to a standard hierarchy of the image expected of him or her. At the same time, individuals are facing up less to their own responsibilities. The purpose of culture is a highly problematic issue today. Culture as rebellion – that is, culture as a liberating element – runs the risk of disappearing and being turned into a product for consumption. The separation between the public and the private sphere is becoming increasingly vague. Rather than a public, we are dealing with audiences, which, conversely, can be measured and quantified in purely economic terms.

Ours is a time of crisis that, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, is systemic. This is why it is important for museums to create historical paradigms that help us to a better understanding of the world in which we live. We need to understand the present in relation to the past and consider the possibilities that the future holds in store for us. The museum has an obligation to point out some paths rather than others, and rather than being technical or dictated by formal rationality, this choice must entail what Max Weber termed *substantive rationality*. When 'anything goes' is the norm, in the general confusion of ideas this choice or series of choices may be perceived as rigid, elitist or dogmatic. We often hear gloomy voices calling for a new style of eclecticism as a way of safeguarding a supposed democratisation of culture. However, substantive rationality is quite the opposite; it is the exercise of reconciling what we learn from science and morality, and always involves an ethical choice.

Most of humankind is the South of which Enrique Dussel speaks, constituting the 'other face' of modernity.⁶ This South is not situated in a pre- or postmodern period, the time previous to a modern age that will be realised by applying the same criteria that served for Europe and the United States. It is not a less evolved stage in the same process. Quite the opposite; we live in a world where the centre presupposes the periphery and *vice versa*; and the

⁵ J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*. London: 4th Estate – HarperCollins, 2006.

⁶ See Enrique Dussel and Karl-Otto Apel, *Ética del discurso y ética de la liberación*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, p. 144.

development of the former is totally related to that of the latter. The problem lies in the fact that this other modernity is subordinate; it has no say. It obeys the rules of the Western European world, since they have been declared universal. Our laws and our moral doctrine tend to justify their own principles from the inside. Slavery, for example, would be unfair in the bourgeois system, but fair in a pro-slavery society; paid work is unfair in socialism because it robs the worker of the surplus value of his labour, but not in capitalism. The only way of breaking with this discursive order is if the instrumental reason is accompanied by an ethical criterion, which is always exterior to the established power and allows the Other to question Totality. Rather than denying the community, this exteriority discovers it as a place of convergence of persons and groups who are free to disagree.

We often imagine an artistic construction in which the Other speaks to us, which is not actually the case. When art pedagogy is institutionalised, art becomes pure rhetoric directed against what is perceived as social chaos.⁷ The museum and the city become a kind of republic of letters, and the artist a national patriarch. It is not enough to represent the Other, it is necessary to find forms of mediation that are both models and specific practices of new forms of solidarity between the intellectual and subordinate communities, and with the various collectives that constitute social movements.

Interpellation, the act of speaking that gives a voice to those who are outside our discursive construction – that is, outside our system of intelligibility – becomes a necessarily ethical position. It requires a degree of exteriority, of being other, different to the official institutional community, which only defends its own interests. The act of interpellation, since it always emerges from outside the prevailing law, by definition opposes consensus and exclusive history, and its line of argument is always radical and rarely accepted. Whereas the official discourse declares the dominator of the centre completely innocent of possible acts of cruelty committed in the periphery during modernity, interpellation will denounce them.

The modern conception of history has its origins in the Enlightenment, in the pure reason of Kant, which starts out from an idealistic, Euro-centric worldview. The modern age began with Europe's expansion in the world and the centrality it conferred upon itself, in keeping with which it not only dominated

⁷ John Beverley, *Against Literature*.
Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press,
1993.

the world system, it also ignored the existence of the Other. Europe imagined its particular history as though it were universal, and what it achieved as a power centre it attributed to its own creativity, as a closed, autonomous, self-referring system. It never defined itself as a centre of hegemony that controlled information, processed learning and built the institutions that allowed a greater accumulation of wealth in the metropolis, with the systematic exploitation of the periphery.⁸ By passing this over, it also glossed over the violence of European colonisation.

Yet what happens if we replace the *ego cogito* of Descartes with the *ego conquiro* of Hernán Cortés? We see that the modern age began not in the eighteenth century, but in the sixteenth century with the conquest of the Americas by the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal. This was the moment of what Marx called primitive accumulation, when today's world organisation began to take form. This being the case, we have to think that there are multiple modernities, not just one, and that they are interdependent, with different impulses and the potential to start at different times. We also have to recognise that, in the field of art, one of these forms of modernity, at least the one related with the Latin American world, began with the baroque – that is, with a theatrical culture, based on multiplicity and folding. In this way, the significance of artistic manifestations such as those of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica or Gego lies in the fact that they are vital not so much to an understanding of the modernity imposed by Europe and the United States, but to apprehending other aesthetic and political practices.

What stance should we adopt in the face of a past in which we do not recognise ourselves and a present that we do not like? What is the function of the museum in the contemporary world? Is there an alternative to the modern museum or the museum that responds to the culture of the spectacle? I would like to think so. The museum moves between subversion and absorption, contemplative passivity and active breakaway, the state and the masses, creation and the market. On the one hand, it is true that it is very difficult to see artistic forms as being able to bring down borders; on the other, it is equally true that they serve to move them. At a time when all arts centres have entered into an endless spiral of ever larger buildings and franchises, when capitalism has reached a point of inexorable expansion, perhaps the time has come to fold,

⁸ Dussel, p. 223.

in the sense in which Pasolini used the term: a turn not inwards, but outwards. Attention to the fragile life of bodies, hostility towards the objectification of our existence and the explicit manifestation of the disappearance of a border between public and private would be some of the most interesting political elements.

To continue the model we established at the start, the proposed alternative would be based on three aspects:

- One or more alternative narrative(s) to modern history.
- New forms of intermediation.
- The consideration of the spectator not as a passive subject or a consumer, but as an agent, a political subject.

Numerous cultures tend to base the history of their art and literature on foundational texts that, since they define the nature of their specific community, are to some extent regarded as sacred, absolute and exclusive. They constitute the foundation of what was, at the time, perceived as a community under threat, based on the segregation of any kind of divergence. This was probably the origin of the major narratives underlying the dominant nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideology. According to Édouard Glissant, these narratives, deriving from an epic source, practically taken down in dictation from the gods, are intimately linked to the closed object, transcendence, corporal immobility and a kind of tradition of consecration, which we call linear thinking.⁹ Today, conversely, it is no longer possible to guarantee this type of formal unity, unthinkable in a world that has shrunk and where there is a peremptory need to invent multiple forms of relation that challenge our mental structures. What I propose, then, is a relational identity that is not single and atavistic, but rhizomatic, having a multiple root.

This involves being open to the Other and addressing the presence of other cultures and ways of proceeding in our own practices, without fearing a hypothetical danger of dissolution.

In societies without a foundational myth, the notion of identity is established not so much by a great narration, or a territory, as by the interweaving of relations between various subjects. Evidently, the poetics of the relation cannot be understood without reference to the notion of place. But this is conceived not as a static territory as much as a series of vectors and lines of force. The

⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996.

centre-periphery dependence loses all meaning; and the centre makes no claims on the periphery, such a frequent occurrence in our country. The relation does not tend from the particular to the general, or *vice versa*, but from the local to the world-totality, which is not universal and homogeneous but plural. The traditional political view was based on the capacity to perceive an environment and at once transcend it, which is how nineteenth-century nationalisms were constituted, but today the constant flow of images that are posited in the magma of our relations means that the perception-transcendence correspondence has changed. Now, we are from a place in a different way. 'We no longer belong to a position, a tradition, a party. The urge to participate or form part of a project is fading. Yet this separation from one's roots, far from relinquishing the sense of belonging, merely strengthens it; the impossibility of being ensconced in a lasting context disproportionately increases adherence to the most fleeting here and now. What clearly comes to light is, in short, belonging as such, no longer qualified by "to what". This sentiment has become directly proportional to the absence of a privileged, protective something to which to belong.'¹⁰ Evidently, this cannot be applied as an omnilateral simultaneous affirmation to all prevailing orders, and all rules and games; it is, rather, a question of reformulating histories and mediations that make us reconsider our 'belonging'.

History has ceased to be written as though it were made up of large continents, to become a kind of archipelago. The author thereby enters into tension, seeking to reflect and relate at once with his or her community and with the world. Art seeks at once the absolute and its opposite – that is, writing and orality. There is no longer a single voice issuing its narrative from a privileged platform; instead, we are immersed in a multiplicity of micro-narratives that has produced a new cartography of art. New York can no longer be said to have stolen the idea of modern art from Paris, because the idea emerges in multiple places and because there is nothing to steal, just relations to establish and render visible. Artists who, in traditional historiography, might have been considered secondary, derivative or simply late developers, such as Georges Vantongerloo, Pablo Palazuelo or Jorge Oteiza, achieve their greatest complexity. For example, we understand that the work of an artist such as Palazuelo has little to do with the quests of modernity but a great deal with the fragility and *expansiveness* of

10 Paolo Virno, *Virtuosismo y revolución. La acción política en la era del desencanto*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 2003, p. 73.

the oral. His works require the participation of the spectator, who is invited to discover the rhythms and forms of his own body in the rhythms and forms with which the artist presents him. He has to appropriate them, recreate them and even reproduce them as he looks at them. Without this dimension, his paintings and drawings would be seen as mere decoration.

The poetics of the relation and diversity materialises in the open work, the transversality of art and poetry, the immanence of orality, bodily movement or the indeterminacy of expanded cinema. The function of the artist or curator is not so much to produce objects or narratives that provoke a reflex response on the part of the spectator as to enable him to recreate his own aesthetic experience. Art is, primarily, experience, and if the spectator does not retain it, it is lost. The involvement of the spectator is, then, essential, as is his capacity to seize and repeat this experience.

The oral has to do with the event and with theatricality, which challenges the visibility device of the white cube. But this does not mean that it should be replaced by its opposite, the black box. Whereas in the former, the spectator remains passive and separate from the work of art, in the latter he is submerged into the cinematographic space, absorbed by the screen and unable to maintain a distance. These two stances are interchangeable, as they do not take into account the specificity of the time and space in which the artwork is exhibited. The space and time of the theatre are, conversely, relational: they exist because there is a spectator. This was particularly the case with Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski and Samuel Beckett, not to mention Antonin Artaud. For Artaud, the word theatrical lost its ontological importance and became a sign that shared the stage with other signs. The stage ceases to be a 'substantial' place and creates its own limits in the interplay of relations of the performance.

Ultimately, such plays are like the other face of modern art. Whereas art promised to make people happy without considering the spectator, the theatre is only possible thanks to him. Theatricality keeps its promise of modern liberation by means of the insurrection of the spectator and the crossing of institutional limits. As Artaud announced, the theatre frees in the social sphere the pathologies that are generated by the violence of

this normalised life that it is our lot to bear: 'Perhaps the theatre's poison, injected into the social body, disintegrates it.'¹¹

Publics are created around texts. The texts, however, are neither neutral nor politically aseptic. By their very nature, they exert an influence on us. There is a close link between them and the way we see our destiny. Foundational narratives determine and, to a large extent, give meaning to the lives of their 'inhabitants', which they model and constrain. We cannot help interpreting our lives in accordance with these texts. If a cultural institution accords its publics the capacity of agent, it is saying that these texts have the capacity to be compared with others, as well as translated and reconsidered. It is precisely by means of this process that we can free 'our destiny'.

How is memory created on the basis of orality? Collecting objects often means transforming them into merchandise. How can events be staged without being fetishised? How to create a museum that does not monumentalise what it explains? The answer lies in conceiving of the collection as an archive. Both museums and archives are repositories from which many stories can be taken and updated. The archive, however, 'de-auratises' them, as it places documents, artworks, books, magazines and photographs on the same level. It shatters the aesthetic autonomy that separates art from its history, redefines the link between object and document, offers the opportunity of discovering new territories beyond the plans of fashion or market, and involves a plurality of readings. The correspondence generated between the artistic phenomenon and the archive produces displacement, drift, alternative narratives and counter-models. It returns to us knowledge and the aesthetic experience, as well as the possibility of apprehending a historic moment in a way that is comparable to Peter Weiss's explanation in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*.

The archive is a *topos*, a place and a *nomos*, a law, as it has the power to interpret the archived elements that speak and recall that law, and call for its observance.¹² The archive not only guarantees the physical safety of the deposit and the support, it also has a hermeneutic authority over them. Archive science must therefore include the theory of this institutionalisation – that is, of the rule that is first written in it and of the law that authorises it. It is this law that establishes firm boundaries, whether we are dealing with family or state law,

11 Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1938.

English edition: *The Theater and Its Double*. New York: Grove Press, 1994.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995. English edition: *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Baltimore, Md.: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995.

the bonds between the secret and the non-secret, or, which amounts to the same, between the private and the public, be it the law of property or right of access, of publication or reproduction, of classification or of order. Effective democratisation is always measured by this essential criterion: participation in and access to the archive and its constitution and interpretation.¹³

Collecting is a need; it forms part of our deepest desires and it is a form of knowledge. But we must not forget how the first museums were built and the way in which the Louvre, the British Museum and others swelled their legacies. The holdings of national galleries have often been gathered as though they were plunder. At a given moment, they all took great pains to have the most prized treasures, be it the Elgin Marbles or the bust of Nefertiti. And these have continued, in recent years, to become tourist attractions, the neo-colonial fate of artworks accumulated by former empires. We have to understand, however, that our collections are not ours; they belong to humankind. Conservators, museum directors, restorers and so on are merely their custodians, not their owners. Earlier, I referred to the importance of creating a body of narratives that intertwine like rhizomes; this is also the sense that should be accorded to collections. Letting the Other have his say means giving him the capacity to archive and rethink his own history, to tell it to us. One solution would be to constitute a universal archive, a kind of archive of archives, which would serve not only to challenge the concept of ownership but also to let those with no voice have their say and know that it is heard.

Stories require a community to pass them on, minds in which to reproduce, a fertile medium that allows them to evolve. If they are not to maintain their auratic nature, narratives have to question the notion of author and renounce the idea of the Romantic genius. Rather than conceiving of history as a succession of great figures, or even as the nomadic individual of this multicultural moment, we have to see it as a throng of supporting actors, the anonymous seething mass of events, destinies, movements and vicissitudes.¹⁴ The author is a vehicle by means of whom a community's 'library' seeks to replicate itself.

It is important for these histories to multiply and circulate as much as possible. Whereas our society's economic system is based on scarcity, which allows art objects to achieve exorbitant values, the new narrative is based on

13 Ibid.

14 'What we want is the education, emergence and movement of the multitude, which has nothing to do with the mass, a homogenous block to be mobilised or a "black hole" to be stimulated by means of surveys.' Ibid.

excess, on an organisation that escapes the criterion of the count. In this case, those who receive the stories are richer, for sure, but those who give (tell) them are not poorer. This involves constituting federations of free communities, a bottom-up process that speaks more of autonomy than of a state power-seizure. It is no longer a question of educating a nation/state uniformly in order to prepare, at best, revolution or, at the worst, consensus. Nor is the idea to avoid ties with institutions, but to establish networks and discover new fields for differing practices. It is not enough to say that the mass media lies or to complain about the way consensus is engineering and imposed; we have to manage its lies, by offering myths and preconstituting the terrain on which the facts are distorted, with the aim of redressing this distortion and producing displacements of meaning.¹⁵

Intrinsically linked to the formation of publics, education is a major pending issue in museography today, as important as the narratives proposed by the museum, or more so. Indeed, it is the popularisation of arts centres in recent decades that has highlighted just how pressing an issue it is. We often hear debates about low standards of education and how we are 'forced' to address ever less educated spectators. Yet it is also true that no other time has seen this vast circulation of information or such apparent ease of access to culture. Museums continue their inexorable race towards the highest visitor figures. What until fairly recently was a space reserved for specialists and the muses has become a meeting place, a prime place to develop relations and social activity. So how is it possible that, precisely when entertainment and free time are associated with formative experience, education is at such a low ebb? Why so much talk of the crisis of culture when never in our recent history have so many people had access to culture?

The problem lies in the fact that pedagogy is still not considered as a potential element of liberation. Most teaching programmes continue to hinder true access to knowledge. Since culture is increasingly becoming an industry, and art, consumer merchandise, it is no wonder that cognition is being replaced by re-cognition. The former aspires to the acquisition of knowledge, and is constantly expanding and difficult to label and consume; the latter is an interchangeable, superficial brand.

15 Ibid.

This is not to undermine the good intentions of those museums that invest considerable effort and resources in bringing art to the public and devise outreach programmes to disseminate the treasures they hold in store. However, these reformist measures have merely served to perpetuate some of the fallacies on which modern pedagogy is based: transparency, progress and education as transmission. As Jacques Rancière points out, this approach is: a) 'obscurantist', because it assumes that the best way to reduce inequality in knowledge is to cut back knowledge itself; b) 'racist', because it supposes that people from working-class backgrounds or underprivileged groups should receive a less abstract and cultural education, and c) 'infantilising' in its maternal conception of the school or education area.¹⁶

The modern age conceived education as a means of conveying knowledge to those who did not have it and, as such, is based on inequality between those who know and those who do not. It established a separation between research and education, between the artwork and its communication, which assumed and perpetuated the distance between educator and spectator. However, knowledge is not necessary for teaching, nor is the explanation vital to the learning process. Explanation is the myth of pedagogy. Instead of eliminating incapacity, it creates it. And it does so, in part, by creating a time structure of delay, consubstantial to modernity: 'a little further along', 'a little later', 'a few more explanations and you'll see the light'.¹⁷

A pedagogy of emancipation presupposes that one 'ignorant person' teaches another. An ignorant person will not be able to teach given contents to another ignorant person, but he can help him to find a path – his own – and to associate apparently diverse things. Rather than a quest for the purity of the primitive or an acultural state, this kind of pedagogy demonstrates the liberating faculty of culture, the capacity we all have to rediscover and redefine knowledge.

Emancipating education is based on a relationship of equality. It is a two-way relation, involving not only the will of the 'teacher' who wishes to address an interlocutor, but also that of the interlocutor in search of emancipation. Intelligence does not exist where there is only aggregation, the reflection of one mind in another. Intelligence exists when each acts, explains what he is doing and offers the means to verify the reality of his actions. This is a proposal that

16 Jacques Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*. Paris: Éditions Fayard, 1987. English edition: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. xiv.
17 *Ibid.*, p. xx.

promotes both duality and community. Rather than the absorption of one mind by another, it allows their interrelation, at the same time maintaining the identity of each.

In this form of education, the artwork is a key element in that it constitutes a link between the artist and the spectator, or between two or more spectators. Idealism places the word above the object. Plato manifested his doubts as to the validity of the written word, whose materiality was merely a shadow of the idea. The discourse of books was, for him, both excessively silent and loquacious, and distracted the mind from its real objective: the idea. The materiality of the book and of the object or artistic phenomenon is precisely the opposite. It redresses the hierarchy of minds, allows the relation between two *ignorant persons* and serves to establish new relations that cancel out the stultifying action of intellectual and moral instruction based on transmission, explanation and prohibition. It also establishes forms of play that are capable of changing the game and generating new ways of seeing the world. It is an active element with which we create and re-create the world in which we live. More than adaptation, implying submission, to our environment, playing, poetry and art make us feel alive and ease passage from one space to another.

The ongoing quest for truth has certainly hindered a radical change in education and stood in the way of a solution to the dilemma that has overshadowed much so-called political art since the late-nineteenth century up until the present day, torn between political engagement and the quest for beauty. It is not that the artwork represents an immutable truth exterior to the subject; it is an enigmatic signifier whose radical ambiguity allows and even demands mobility of relations, the contingency of beings and things.

The artistic experience is a transitional phenomenon, because it generates an illusion in the spectator that prompts him to relate with others and with an environment that, though exterior, is not perceived as alien. It makes us see ourselves both as subjects and objects of the perception of others, creating new and liberating spaces of sociability. It is logical to think 'that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience... which is not challenged

(arts, religion, etc.).¹⁸ This calls for a certain right to opacity, to the absence of a need to 'understand' the Other – that is, to reduce him to the model of our own existence in order to live with him. The opacity of any work of art, rather than impeding knowledge, offers the promise of new knowledge and expands our field of epistemological appropriations. The problem arises when, as a result of authoritarianism, academia or the market, the zones of experience established are closed in on themselves. The result is a pathological society that is probably not so different to the one in which it has fallen to our lot to live.

18 D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*. London: Pelican Books, 1974, p. 15.