Chapter 3
Will There Still Be a Future When the Museum of the Future Arrives?

Joshua Decter

Abstract I'm more worried about the future of our futures than I am worried about the future of our museums.

From a pessimistic anthropocene-capitalocene theoretical perspective, the future has already become our past. From an accelerationist theory perspective, the sooner we arrive at the future that has already become our past the better, so that we can move beyond the capitalist-planetary apocalypse. Beyond what, however, if there is actually no future? I'm being somewhat hyperbolic, and yet, there is deep anxiety and uncertainty gripping the globe at the start of 2018. Some of us are suffering from political post-traumatic stress disorder in reaction to the outcome of the 2016 election here in the United States. Will museums be the only things left standing in the future without a future? Are museums already the ruins of a lost future world? Or, are museums our continuously accumulating contemporary future? Within "developed/first-world" and certain "developing" economies—expressions I use hesitatingly, as they tend to reproduce global hierarchies that I'm deeply skeptical of—art museums would not seem to be imperiled now nor likely in the near future, at least on financial terms. It appears that large-scale art museums have attracted sufficient real capital, art capital, and cultural capital to weather most economic and political storms, even as museums have come under attack from some on the right and some on the left, with demands to either close exhibitions or to remove controversial artworks from shows. It is likely, though, moving forward, that museums will continue to have sustained relevance, even though various audiences and publics will have different expectations from museums and will apply pressure for various kinds of institutional reform. Museums are now deemed to be key engines of cultural tourism and the attention/experience/distraction economies, and so they are not going away anytime soon. And yet, depending upon local, regional, and national economies—and their connections to the global economy—museums of medium and small scales may experience increased fundraising challenges from public, private, and other hybrid sources. Big capital tends to be attracted to the idea of big institutions. For example, in the case of the new Broad museum in Los Angeles, Eli Broad combined his own private capital with his private art collection—and leveraged his significant political influence in Los

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Angeles for many decades—to create a big contemporary art museum in downtown LA that embodies, for better and/or for worse, the powerful intersection of art and the art markets, and has helped popularize contemporary art for wider publics. This particular museum is free to visitors because it can afford to be free, ironically or not.

Keywords City and cities · Culture · Economy · Future of futures · Future of museums · Society · Transmute and transmutation

Introduction

There may be certain global standards that have been established for how to build and operate modern and/or contemporary art museums, and we can perhaps use some of those standards as the criteria for professional evaluations, yet the vast majority of museum visitors are not arts professionals, and their criteria of evaluating their museum experiences may not be in synch with the art professional class. And so we have an interesting tension: museums endeavor to think about their public outreach and public education programs, and yet there is a lot of unpredictability, for instance, in the encounter between multiple publics visiting one museum. So what makes a museum relevant, and what criteria do we use to determine this, moving forward? Is it the quality of a museum's exhibitions? The quality of a museum's architectural design? The quality of a museum's social media presence, its commitment to diversity, and equal pay? The quality (and/or quantitative business success) of a museum's restaurant? And the quality (and/or quantitative business success) of a museum's shop? Or is the success or failure of a museum predicated upon the quality of its board, its committees, its attendance figures, its politics, its investments, its divestments, its users' experiences (since museums are driver's in the so-called experience economies), and its membership statistics? Or perhaps, the number of museum selfies people post on Instagram and other social media platforms? Or, ultimately, all of the above and more? My sense is that for those of us who have been art professionals for a number of decades, we may have begun to experience a certain level of alienation from museums—i.e., a growing sense that museums may no longer really be for us but instead for everyone else. On the one hand, in terms of a notion of democratized culture, the fact that museums seem to be bringing art to more and more people might be welcomed as a positive development. On the other hand, the inexorable economic and public relations pressures upon museums of various scales to continuously grow their audiences, constituencies, publics, and of course funders may be creating a situation in which those who belong to the expert/specialist/professional art classes—curators, art historians, critics, artists, and others—are perhaps already the secondary or tertiary priority for museums. Furthermore, the crowding of certain museums produces another kind of museum experience (fleeting engagements framed by endless distractions), as well as the pressure to design other kinds of museum spaces to accommodate an overflow of bodies. Will the future bring us museums engineered only for crowds, yet bereft

of art? And yet we should be wary of recent episodes involving the use of online social media petitions to trigger outrage from publics so as to pressure museums to alter their curatorial and programming decisions; this is a disturbing trend, particularly when some in the art worlds join those barbarian hordes clamoring for museums to engage in what can only be characterized as self-censorship. Such developments suggest that some people have forgotten that a fundamental role of the museum (whether these institutions are public, private, or hybrids) is to be a place wherein diverse audiences and constituencies encounter art that they may not understand and that may widen their experience of the world, even if these publics are confused or offended by what they see in the museum—*particularly* if they are offended by what they encounter in the museum. Protests demanding the closure of exhibitions and/or the removal of artworks from exhibitions contradict the basic function of the museum, which is to serve various publics; ironically, such protests have the primary effect of depriving many publics, audiences, and constituencies of their right to encounter art in the space of the museum. Just as everyone has the right to protest a museum, everyone has the right to experience what a museum is presenting. No one is forced to enter a museum, just as no one is forced to watch a movie in a theater, and just as no one is forced to read a book (leaving aside educational situations). To enter a museum is to enter a space of complexity and dissensus, a civic space wherein if we cannot agree, we must at the very least agree to disagree. If we were to remove from public view every artwork that offended someone, there would be very few artworks on public view, and this is not the world that we want.

Museums: Resiliency and Contradiction

Museums—whether devoted to art, architecture, science, nature, the news, history, or anything else—tend to be resilient organizations that can usually survive private and/or public funding crises, political attacks, and other existential challenges. Museums are resilient precisely because they embody contradictory yet ultimately compatible conditions: they are dependent upon large amounts of capital to operate, and they are—certainly in the case of contemporary art institutions—also often dependent artistic interrogations of capital. Capital and its critique exist comfortably (and/or uncomfortably) side by side within museums, so that we can have patrons with conservative political views funding museums that present exhibitions that reflect progressive perspectives. Such contradictions and tensions have become normative. One might even suggest, invoking Herbert Marcuse's ideas, that museums are the perfect platforms on which to perform *repressive tolerance*, even though they create the impression that nothing is indeed being repressed.

Much has already been written about the art museum as a site of profound cultural, economic, class, and other contradictions. Today, in a world in which art museums are only possible through massive accumulations of capital and power, whether garnered from the private sector, public sector, or political sector—or some combination of these—does art still stand a chance to engage in any reasonable

critique of these institutional conditions? Or is this merely self-delusional, wishful thinking? Are mega-museums the last great hope for art, art's fortress against intolerance? Can we still afford, so to speak, to critique museums—or, for museums to critique themselves—in this confusing, troubled period, when there is more money for art than perhaps at any other moment in history, and yet so much economic inequity at the same time? Does such critical analysis threaten the future of museums—or, on the contrary, make the future of museums potentially even stronger? The museum of the present and the museum of the future shouldn't be places of self-censorship; to the contrary, the museum of the future should be a palace devoted to freedom of expression regardless of the content of that expression.

Museum as Memory

One means of addressing ourselves to the future is to address ourselves to the past.

As a child, I never much liked art museums. My parents started taking me—or shall I say kidnapping me—to museums when I was growing up in Manhattan during the 1960s and 1970s. I still recall accompanying my late father to MoMA in the middle of the afternoon, barely any other people in the galleries, sitting next to him on a bench as he contemplated Monet's *Water Lilies*. He was endeavoring to edify me, but all I wanted to do was go to the Central Park zoo, shop for bubble gum, or watch Star Trek on television. And even when I was taken to the encyclopedic Metropolitan Museum of Art, I preferred the armor collection to the fine art. Today, I sometimes imagine, half-seriously, that what may have initially attracted me to institutional critique art was a childhood aversion to art museums and what I perceived to be an atmosphere of self-serious, elitist, stuffiness, and even hypocrisy. Ironically, now, it's almost as if the reverse is happening: it is the increasingly unserious, post-elitist, populist, entertainment-driven, market-infatuated, and unscholarly character of contemporary art museum exhibitions that is a turnoff for me. If I could have a fully immersive online experience of museum exhibitions, I might even forgo visiting brick-and-mortar edifices, just to avoid the crowds. The technological future of the museum transmitted to us via real-time telepresence has in fact already arrived, before the future.

The Museum of Crowds

As conservative, exclusionary, and elitist as this may sound, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea if art museums of the future were a bit more like art museums of the past: places where we could engage with art uninterrupted by people taking Selfies in front of the artwork that we're trying to engage with. The art museum experience that was more about art than it was about art crowds. Certain large-scale museums in metropolitan centers have mutated into frenetically overpopulated zones that we

wait in line for hours to enter, by which time all we want to do is eat at the museum's restaurant, after which we're too exhausted to look at the art, and simply return home, as defeated cultural tourists. The museum of madding crowds, nothing more, nothing less. Perhaps, in the future, we'll need art museums for distinct audiences and constituencies: e.g., The Museum for Art Professionals who don't wish to be bothered by other people, The Museum for People Who Aren't Art Professionals and don't wish to be bothered by arts professionals, and so on and so forth.

It would seem that the more crowded museums become, the more museums will need to be in the business of crowd control; I'm not talking about barricades, water cannons, and tear gas, of course, but rather an effort to cater to the individuals who actually constitute these museum-going crowds, the publics who throng to the museum as a principle tourist attraction. Expanding the architectural-spatial footprint of museums is one obvious strategy of managing the increasing flow of bodies passing through, half-distractedly, the museum; another approach is to cater to the individual needs of the art consumers who are part of this flow. Crowds cannot be allowed to become too alienated from the museum nor too coddled by it; a balance must be struck. Technology tends to be the default mediator in enabling this balancing act; it is often left to recorded narrative guide/virtual docent programs, and now Apps, to help visitors understand what they're experiencing in the museum, to function as institutional navigation systems, and to keep publics moving through the museum at a reasonable pace, so as to allow the next throng to pass through the galleries. Museums are machines that produce and reproduce their publics, because without publics, there might not be museums. But can't we have publics for museums without overcrowded museums? This seems to be a dilemma and a challenge, for the future of museums (see Photo 1).

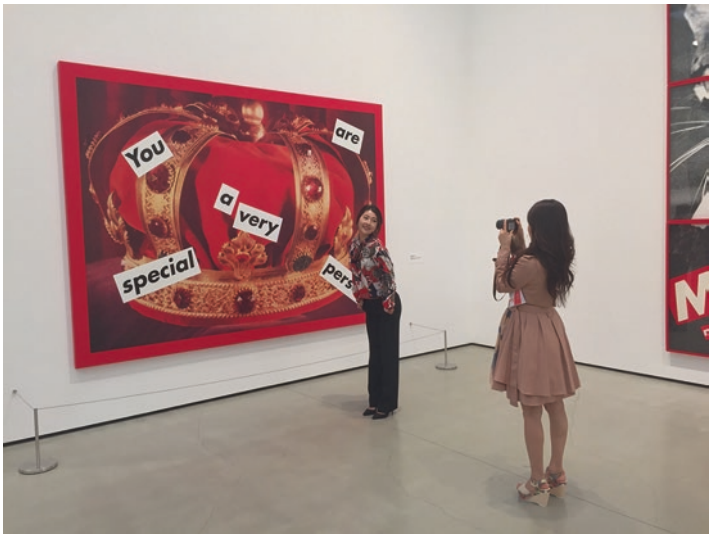

Photo 1 Inside the Broad museum, Los Angeles, March 21, 2017. Photo: Joshua Decter

We Are Curated by the Museum

When museum visitors hear an anonymous voice of authority, a personalized greeting from the museum director, or a curator providing a narrative for an exhibition, delivered straight into their brains via headphones or earplugs, such educational aids and explanatory devices may reassure visitors that they are being taken care of by the museum. This is less an instance of the museum infantilizing its publics, or merely the museum explaining to its publics what they are experiencing and how they should experience it, but rather, a case of the museum curating its publics. Yes, we are curated by the museums we visit. We are the ultimate objects/subjects of (temporary) collection and presentation by the museum, for the duration that we inhabit the museum. Looking at exhibitions in museums means that we are on display while looking at exhibitions in museums; in other words, we are always observing others looking at art in museums while we are looking at art in museums. Everything is on display, everything is being observed; within the space of the museum, we are all under a regime of institutional curation. Who needs neo-performance art in museums when it's really the museum's publics, us, who are doing all of the performing inside/for museums.

The Future of Museums in Relation to the Future of Cities (and States?)

Speaking of museums, publics, performance, and voyeurism, the moment that the Museum of Sex opened up here in New York City in October 2002, just over a year after 9/11, I finally understood that there was no limit to what a museum could be. And yet the Museum of Sex seems rather tame compared with some lunatic-fringe museums here in the United States, such as the Christian Arts Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and the Creation Museum based in Petersburg, Kentucky, which have been established to promote faith-based and antiscientific versions of history. In other words, postfact museums. For a 2015 lecture at The Jewish Museum in New York, I ruminated about what Jewishness is for me—and what a Jewish museum may or may not be. I considered a paradoxical situation: The Palestinian Museum now exists in Birzeit in the Palestinian territories, yet there is still no Palestinian State. The Jewish Museum was founded in 1904, yet its collection was not made public until the institution opened in a new building in 1947, just 1 year before the State of Israel was established. In the intervening years, we might say that like the Jewish people, The Jewish Museum was a collection of Jewish art and artifacts in a state of diaspora, looking for an institutional home and making a claim for a future post-diasporic homed condition (i.e., statehood). The Palestinian Museum institution is likewise also making a claim for a future post-diasporic homed condition (i.e., statehood), even as it exists within an unhomed situation. All museums in one way or another

embody the political-cultural aspirations of cities, regions, states, and nations; museums materialize the political powers of culture and the cultural powers of politics.

In terms of the future of the museum in relation to the future of cities, will museums become islands of diversity amidst a calm, frictionless urban sea of homogeneity and monoculture? One of my concerns has been the question of diversity and inclusion, and what we mean by these things in 2018, in contrast to what we meant by these ideas during the 1990s. The crucial struggle for increased racial diversity in regard to the hiring practices of museums has been longstanding, but progress has been slow; however, within the past few years, partly in response to pressure from activists, there has been an acceleration of museums hiring more nonwhite and ethnically diverse curators. I've supported such efforts for decades. But as museums may be becoming somewhat more inclusive and diverse, it seems that previously diverse and cosmopolitan cities are becoming less diverse and less cosmopolitan due to the rising costs of real estate, with artists and other cultural workers being priced out. We've already seen this happening in New York City, where real estate markets have been increasingly deregulated, rents and prices have skyrocketed in various boroughs, and the city is becoming a luxury product for those who can afford it, while young artists emerge from school burdened with student loans and must make their way in an unforgiving environment. Over a decade ago, even before the hyper-acceleration of real estate markets here, we observed artists moving to more affordable cities such as Berlin, and today we see that even Berlin is experiencing the pressures of so-called "neoliberal" overdevelopment. Ironically or not, museums tend to benefit from the inflow of money into cities, for without capital, museums cannot be capitols of art (so to speak). Most artists do not support themselves entirely with their art, and with precious little public sector for artists here in the United States, they must work other kinds of jobs either in the arts sector or in some other "creative industry," and so now the question has become not only where can artists find a community of other artists (and curators, writers, etc.), but where can one find a job to maintain a life as an artist in an increasingly expensive city? One could make analogous observations about curators, writers, and others in the art and culture sectors. There's also the question of who constitutes the so-called creative classes, and it's important to recognize that while it's possible to make the argument that our urban "creative classes" may include the traditional category of artist, the term "creative class" was meant to connote a wide range of practices and disciplines: designers, architects, technologists/coders, writers, musicians, etc. We need to dig deeper to understand that the financial conditions and economics of each of these groups of "creative producers" are quite different, even though there can be some crossover: e.g., a visual artist who has coding skills and works for a technology firm, while also producing Internet art. But it's clear that the majority of visual artists are rather low on the economic totem pole, and it's increasingly difficult for artists to exist within what used to bohemian subcultural habitats, since those formerly bohemian urban places and spaces have been largely repurposed into entertainment and experience economy zones: e.g., the neo-subculture as hotel lobby, or, perhaps, the neo-subculture as museum lobby.

In 2018, just as everyone can be a curator, and everything can be curated, biennials continue proliferating like ants, and it appears that everyone wants a museum for their city: the museum-culture-industry complex seems to be thriving, at least in certain urban centers where there is sufficient capital to develop, build, and sustain museums. These places still tend to be the traditional loci of national/transnational/global capital for art culture (New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Vienna, and various other European art capitals), as well as the more recently emerged loci of capital for art, such as China and other parts of Asia. The Guggenheim Bilbao, of course, was to a certain extent a test to determine whether a postindustrial economy city could be revived by the building of a new museum; i.e., the museum as an incubator of broader urban redevelopment, the museum as a factory, so to speak, for the manufacturing of art-culture tourism. At the start of 2017, I noticed a brief article on CNN's website, entitled, "The most anticipated, and beautifully designed, museums opening in 2017." These include the Louvre Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, the King Abdulaziz Centre for World Culture in Dhahran, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto, and Exhibition Road at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/05/arts/new-museums-opening-in-2017/). This is more evidence that various kinds of museums continue to play a key role in how cultural, political, social, and economic capital is shaped into a seductive representation of a nation's power. Museums can remake places and create new destinations in the middle of vast deserts.

We've probably reached the point already in which new cities are being planned around the development of new museums, as opposed to new museums being planned around the development of new cities. In the future, it would not be farfetched to imagine the museum itself expanded into a kind of cultural city, the museum as art megalopolis. This might not be such a bad thing, yet we must always ask at what the price and with what kind of trade-offs such museum-led urban redevelopments occur. In other words, if we are committed to authentically cosmopolitan cities—and by authentically cosmopolitan I mean an intersection/constellation of racial, ethnic, religious, class, ideological, gender, cultural, and other diversities that are the necessary ingredients to the textures and frictions that allow for cosmopolitanism and equitable (i.e., socially and economically just) cities—it's not enough for museums to only work internally toward infra-institutional diversities (e.g., more inclusive hiring practices). Museums should also endeavor to encourage cosmopolitanism and equity more broadly within social and economic ecosystems. Again, diversity, inclusiveness and opportunity should not only occur inside the walls of the museum, as a kind of symbolic exhibition of diversity and opportunity, but also fostered throughout the urban environs (see Photo 2).

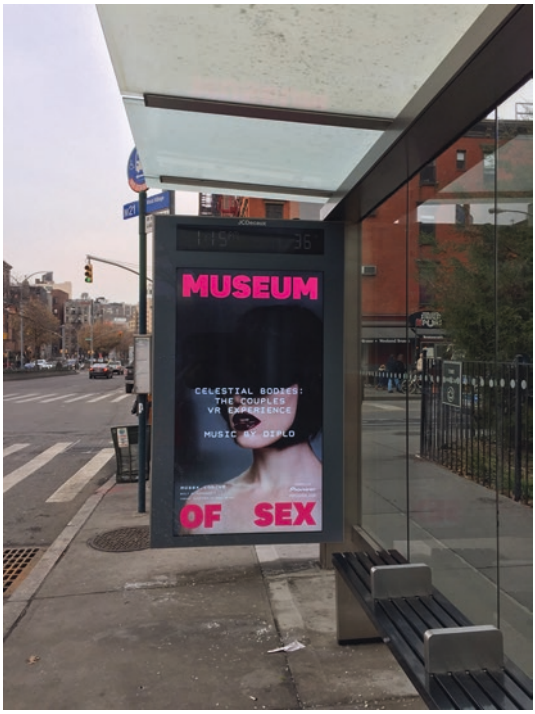

Photo 2 Bus stop advertisement for The Museum of Sex, New York City, December 17, 2017. Photo: Joshua Decter

The Museum as Neo-Subculture

Returning to the question of post-subcultural life in a place such as New York City, it's conceivable that authentic cosmopolitanism—to a certain extent preserved by a longstanding mix of working class, middle class, and upper class populations—is under threat by the homogenizing effects of pandemic wealth, wherein a safe, frictionless monocultural sameness is the objective. When people move to NYC from the wealthy suburbs and transpose the ethos of the gated community to the city, mall culture begins to predominate. Are museums becoming art malls? Are cities becoming museums of themselves? In the not so recent past, one might have been able to find a niche in some kind of subcultural realm; at least one could keep up the illusion, or the self-delusion, that one could still be odd, weird, and idiosyncratic in the city. Today, as authentic subculture withers, some museums seek to reanimate historical subcultures within the institutional frame. And while such efforts may be salutary, I would contend that this is not really authentic subculture any longer, but instead, a curated, relatively sanitized version of subculture designed for

consumption by broad publics. In 1996, when I curated an exhibition entitled "a/drift" at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies Museum (which included non-art materials from various youth subcultures), I argued that the museum is a platform for the artificial restaging of subculture but that it is not subculture, per se. Maybe this is the most we can hope for these days. Perhaps it's better to have a pseudo-subculture inside the museum than no subculture whatsoever. Some will claim that museums have the capacity to produce new bohemian enclaves and subcultures—and cosmopolitanism—within cities, but again, I would submit that museums can only generate neo-bohemianism and neo-subcultures within the post-cosmopolitan city. Authentic subcultures, real bohemian enclaves, and true cosmopolitanism emerge over time, organically. I'm not convinced that these conditions can be programmed or synthesized in a museum laboratory, so to speak. Perhaps the scent of cosmopolitanism or bohemianism can be simulated, and maybe that's sufficient for some.

Simulated Museums for Simulated Cities

I've noticed recently that in Manhattan, luxury residential condominium buildings are being designed to simulate hotels (with hotel amenities) and that luxury hotels are being designed to simulate residential buildings. Museums—such as the SANAA-designed New Museum and the recently opened Renzo Piano Whitney Museum next to the High Line—seem to prefer slick, functional, neomodernist, or supermodernist postindustrial designs that not only invoke an urban future of hypermodernist frictionlessness but also simulate the reality of the museum as an efficient factory for the production of art publics. In other words, the museum as a symbol of art's power in the experience-based economy. These days, it's not so much "art as experience" (as John Dewey once theorized), but rather art as an *experience economy* of the present and future, with the art museum as the platform for this experience manufacturing. This is certainly not a new phenomenon, for if we trace the museum back to its origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this institution was meant to function as a kind of public sphere post-palace of cultural enlightenment, and the whole point was to attract broader publics to partake in the spectacle of democratized culture—not just the elites and cognoscenti. Art museums have always led a double life, and have embodied deep cultural, social, and economic contradictions: elitism for the masses, avant-gardism for the populace, and high culture for the everyday culture. This is unlikely to change in the future. Art museums embody and produce these contradictions, and function as interlocutors and mediators between the cognoscenti and the curious cultural tourists… some of whom, in the future, might become members of the art intelligentsia.

We cannot talk about museums today, or museums of the future, without at the same time talking about the sheer expense involved in sustaining these institutions, and/or building new ones. Fundraising and capital campaigns are at the core of all museums, and because so much is at stake in terms of generating capital for muse-

ums, there really is no room for mistakes, particularly when it seems that museums have decided that in order to survive in a city such as New York, they have to expand and grow. The museum of the future will be a museum that either grows or perishes. And therefore PR campaigns—increasingly the use of social media as a platform for publicity—are probably just as important as the exhibitions they are publicizing. The museum of the future may be a museum of publicity about itself.

The Museum as a Service/Experience Economy

Museums tend to increasingly treat their visitors like guests, the museum experience beginning to converge with the hotel experience. Guest services for museumgoers. Museums as a new hospitality industry. Soon, perhaps, curators (whose traditional responsibility was to take care of the artworks in the institution's collection) will become concierges for the museum's guests: to attend to their every need, and pamper them with deluxe amenities. Well, this has already been happening, of course. The museum cannot afford—literally and figuratively—to alienate its publics or its *guests*. In our post-neo-avant-garde times, it is not art that outrages people at the museum, but rather, if there is bad food at the museum's restaurant, or if the gift shop doesn't have great T-shirts. In the future, perhaps, museums will become platforms for the convergence of various applications and uses. The all-in-one museum experience, featuring restauranteurs as curators, curators as restauranteurs, bankers as curators, and curators as bankers. Everything will flow together into a museum singularity. Museums want everything quantified; they want to harness big data so that they can track their guests, and also develop deep knowledge about their guests. Museums want to know us inside and out. Museums want to have relationships with us. Museums want to haunt our dreams. In dreams, museums walk with us.

Transmute the Museum

In the 1990s, I became increasingly interested in the possibility of utilizing technology as a tool to experiment with various forms of engagement and interactivity. If the internet was meant to herald a new era of democratization (on economic, political, cultural, social, and other terms), then why not use technologies to democratize curating and museums, to produce greater institutional transparency and accountability to a broader, more diverse range of communities and publics? In other words, to consider publics as *users* of museums, just as publics were already becoming *users* of technology. The museum is a technology too. I wanted to consider the web as a new platform/virtual place-space for art and curating, and to suggest interfaces, at once tactile and ephemeral, between the physical world of exhibitions, art objects, and museum/gallery walls, and the world of the digital, the Internet, and cyberspace. In 1999, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, I conceptualized

and developed interactive "virtual curator" and "virtual artist" programs for my collection-based exhibition, *Transmute*. The exhibition took place, and non-place, so to speak, across four interrelated platforms: in the physical galleries of the museum, via "virtual curator" and "virtual artist" interactive programs on touch-screen kiosks and online via the museum's website, and through outreach to the museum's publics who were invited to respond to John Baldessari's "Fish and Ram" by contributing an image that, if selected, would become part of a digital archive that visitors/users could access to generate a new version of the Baldessari work. The "virtual curator" and "virtual artist" components of *Transmute* were designed to give visitors the tools to learn about curating (and the museum's collection), in a way that involved a process of remaking—at the level of representational imaginaries—the exhibition, and the collection. At the time, I considered interactivity as a pedagogical tool that could be used to challenge traditional models of museum education, and to question how the institution constituted its authority and power. By extension, I imagined the that the "virtual curator" interface could demystify how curators navigate art, exhibitions, and institutions, and that the "virtual artist" interface could demystify how artists make art (see Photos 3 and 4).

Transmute proposed that the distinctions between physical-material museum space and nonphysical-dematerialized museum space were steadily eroding in the internet age, at least on conceptual terms, and that this offered the possibility to give more control, perhaps even some symbolic power, to publics—particularly in relation to how they interacted with the arcane context of the art museum. And, as an extension of my longtime engagement with the complexities of institutional critique, I was interested in the possibility that by building interactive technology into

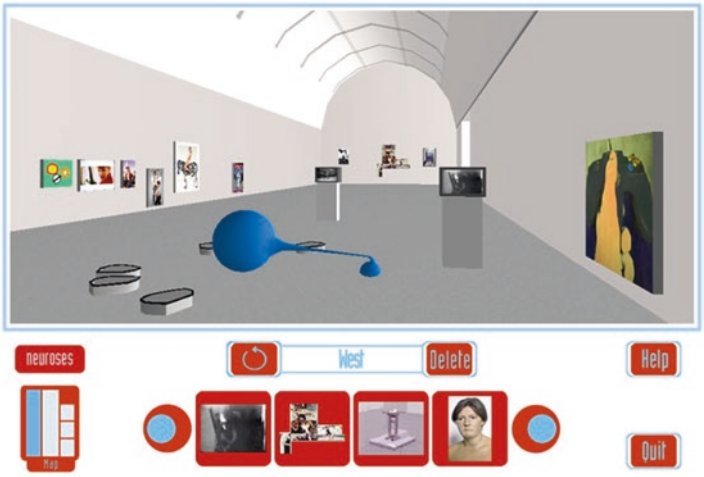

Photo 3 *Transmute*, conceived/curated by Joshua Decter, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, August 21–November 7, 1999. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photo: Joshua Decter

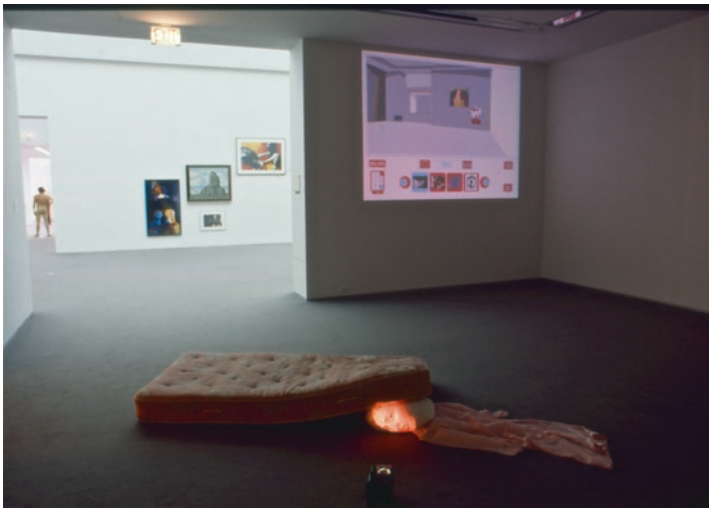

Photo 4 *Transmute*, conceived/curated by Joshua Decter, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, August 21 -November 7, 1999. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photo: Joshua Decter

the heart of an exhibition, publics might be encouraged to question the symbolic authority of the curator, and the power of the museum. In other words, to employ interactive technology to trigger different forms of social and critical engagement, rather than utilizing normative modes of museum education and community outreach; to offer publics an opportunity to produce something in relation to the institution, and not merely be passive receivers of art. The idea was that people could *use* the museum rather than just being used by the museum, so to speak, as anonymous publics/customers. As the Internet age accelerated in the 1990s, it occurred to me that the relationship between museum and publics wasn't evolving in interesting directions. A few museums were beginning to develop web presences, and there were a handful of efforts being made to think about institutional virtuality (e.g., the Guggenheim's 1998/1999 "Virtual Guggenheim" designed by Asymptote), but I was preoccupied by the democratic promise of the Internet as a mechanism of redistributing power, as naive as this sounds today. *Transmute* was meant to give some control, perhaps only a symbolic kind of control, to museum publics.

Techno-Museums and Social Mediatization

Today, in 2018, there are already robots functioning as tour guides in some museums, and we can expect this to increase in the future. At the de Young Legion of Honor Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, for example, an ambulatory device referred to as "Beam" (designed by Suitable Technologies), allows for those with

disabilities to make virtual visits to the museum remotely: all that is required is a computer with a camera and a Wi-Fi signal. Users log in to the system, and the "Beam" units travel through the museum along predetermined routes, providing high-resolution, real-time, transmission of the museum. The "Beam" robots are also equipped with screens, microphones, and a speaker system, facilitating real-time interaction between remote users and any individuals who are present with the "Beam" unit in the museum, so that docents and curators can be asked questions. At the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, a robot unit with similar technology can be controlled remotely by people with physical disabilities and actually navigated through the museum according to their own interests, allowing for enhanced control by the user (a museum guide is always present, however, if assistance is required). And at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, robots "Kasparov" and "Chesster" are considered to be museum employees and provide laser-guided virtual tours of the museum to anyone globally. One can imagine that these kinds of systems will have appeal beyond people with disabilities: in the very near future, you will be able to do a remote tour of a museum by using an App on a mobile smart device to connect to a robot tour guide. Or, as I've suggested in relation to the *Transmute* exhibition project, allow publics to take on the role of curators in museums, by using robots to operate as their surrogates/extensions inside the walls of the institution. And once such robots are equipped with increasingly advanced AI, human curators may become an anachronism. Just kidding (maybe).

MuseumNext (http://www.museumnext.com) is a rather different enterprise, which seems to perceive itself, regrettably, as a kind of TED talks for the museum industry. I use the expression "museum industry" quite purposefully, since this kind of organization embodies what I would consider to be a kind of corporatist ethos regarding the global museum system. An excerpt from their web homepage reads: "MuseumNext is a global conference on the future of museums. Since 2009 it has acted as a platform for showcasing best practice today to shine a light on the museum of tomorrow." It goes without saying that in order for museums to function effectively, there need to be various kinds of institutional competences and best practices utilized, but professionalism is the operational infrastructure of museums, not a vision for the future code of museums. Today, many museums already have too many layers of administration and insufficient layers of experimentalism. The museum of the future should be an ethical institution and an innovative institution; we shouldn't have one without the other.

In an early January 2017 issue of the Wall Street Journal, I noticed an article titled "The Top Selfie-Worthy Museum Shows of 2017," with the banner: "To boost visitors, museums and galleries are mounting Instagram-ready exhibits" (http://www.wsj.com/articles/art-shows-that-shine-in-selfies-1483977882). The appearance of such an article is rather self-explanatory, not requiring deep critical analysis, for it is emblematic of how museums are attempting to adapt to, and exploit, the mediating networks of social media. More and more museums are endeavoring to attract public attention in the attention economy via their social media extensions, as these platforms are thought to drive people from the *space* of social media towards museum websites, and from websites to the bricks-and-mor-

tar spaces of museums. This sequence from virtuality to materiality (or vice-versa) is not guaranteed, of course, since it is also quite conceivable that more and more people will prefer to stay in the infinite feedback loop of social media museum platforms and museum websites, and just forget about migrating into a museum's physical space altogether. Today, though, we see a kind of recombinant logic of all of these museum places and *nonplaces*, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Beyond Educational Outreach and Crowdsourcing: The Socially Engaged Museum

As amazing as the tech revolution was— and is— it has yet to fulfill certain things: such as helping to bring about economic and social equity in the United States. One wouldn't want to lay the blame for this at the feet of the tech sector, per se, since much of the current economic inequity we see is due to various economic policies from the 1980s that tended to deregulate the corporate sectors, in tandem with a shift from a postindustrial manufacturing base to a service-based base and other factors, all of which has benefited the tech sector, of course. How might we utilize the tech sectors and the art sectors in the service of more sustainable forms of economic, social and racial justice? Are museums the best kinds of institutions to think about—and take on— these challenges? And so how might a museum harness state-of-the-art technology to rethink how to engage communities in a way that creates a dynamic interconnection of interests and needs across various cultural, social, and class divides?

The new extension of the Tate Modern featured a program called "Tate Exchange" on the fifth floor of the building, which gave community members and perhaps other publics an opportunity to engage with the museum in different ways, as outlined here: http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/tate-exchange. And so, after having built a new multimillion dollar Herzog and De Meuron-designed extension, the Tate is performing itself as an institution that cares about its communities, that perhaps wishes to reassure people who might have become alienated from the excesses of art capital and art spectacle, and that may want to signal that the Tate is not complicit in unfair urban redevelopment (i.e., gentrification gone amuck) in London. In other words, the Tate Modern rebranded as a democratic, egalitarian, socially engaged institution. We'll see how things develop in the future, but one thing is already clear: the Tate has become self-aware of its contradictions as an institution. That with the benefits of regional, national, and global art tourism, the Tate Modern also has a responsibility to local communities who probably understand themselves to be more than just another anonymous audience, with a different stake in the institution. But just how socially engaged, how participatory, and how egalitarian can an art museum actually be before it becomes something other than an art museum? Is there still something to be said for elitism? Or can art museums be places wherein elitism and egalitarianism intersect in unprecedented, creative ways?

And then there are initiatives that attempt a more fundamental rethink of what museums are, what they do, and for whom they exist. A new organization based in Toronto, Canada, Myseum (http://myseumoftoronto.com), is seeking to reimagine the idea of a museum in relation to the city and its local communities and has created a nonprofit platform for residents to contribute information about self-organized events throughout Toronto. Myseum seems to function mainly as a kind of web-based bulletin board for urban events, and a recent festival was organized that collated a range of activities around the city addressing urban histories, art, politics, gender issues, etc. So this is certainly not a museum in any traditional sense, as there seems to be no institutional building that houses a staff, galleries, or a collection. It may not even be a museum, per se, but rather a group of people committed to engaging with Toronto's various art and culture scenes who invented a new term—"myseum"—to challenge normative ideas of what a museum is, and to suggest that the city, itself, can be thought of as a kind of readymade museum of art and culture. Indeed, Myseum seems more akin to a DIY nonprofit organization that utilizes a website to provide information about art and cultural events. So in this instance, the word museum is perhaps deployed figuratively to connote the idea that the museum is all around us (just look and you will find it). That anyone can make a museum, in a sense. One question I would have for the organizers of Myseum: if you are suspicious of the elitism and exclusivity of museums (even as museums make themselves more and more accessible to larger publics), is it even necessary any longer to invoke the institutional frame of the museum? Perhaps what Myseum really wants is to transcend, so to speak, the paradigm of the museum, in favor of a paradigm of collective social self-organization wherein power and cultural capital is somehow redistributed beyond the frame of the museum.

Performing Critique in/for the Museum

The neo-performance art craze of recent years seems to be fueled to a certain extent by a re-performing, so to speak, of the earlier radical, experimental histories of performance of the 1960s and 1970s, in an attempt to recapture and repurpose some of that historical energy in the contemporary moment. There seems to be an assumption today that doing performance in museums troubles the museum, whereas I think that performance in museums tends to re-perform the power of the museum, even though performance may create the impression that the museum is a place of unfettered experimentation and improvisation. What museum today doesn't have some kind of real-time, performance (or other forms of live art events, situations, actions) happening on its exhibition calendar? In other words, if the majority of art museums are presenting neo-performance, which tends to follow a fairly predictable logic, it can't be too troubling to or for museums. My concern is that neo-performance may be the perfect kind of post-critical art form: it appears to enliven the enervated space of the museum, interrupt the normative flow of crowds through the space of the institution, all the while offering publics a kind of vicarious thrill that they are also performing themselves inside museums. And so we have a meeting of performances: artists

performing and publics performing. The museum performs itself as a public performance of publics. I'm just a bit skeptical about whether all of this performative activity challenges the entertainment-culture logic of the museum, merely feeds it, or perhaps both.

Let's consider the case of Tino Sehgal, who has managed to converge (neo)institutional critique, (neo)performance, live-/time-based art and scripted theater to form a hybrid practice that makes certain demands upon museum visitors: a test of whether the public even recognizes Sehgal's hired actor-agents-performers as performers, per se, or merely as idiosyncratic members of the same public. It is an ambiguity that Sehgal has cultivated to quite striking effect, as a way of estranging publics from themselves. And yet Sehgal leaves essentially unchallenged the institutional frame within which his projects take place. The museum is, in a sense, taken for granted, and his practice seems tailor-made for the way in which publics are continuously curated, as I proposed earlier, within and by the institutional frame. In a sense, Sehgal re-curates already curated publics, producing a bit of anxiety in terms of the relations between artist, performer, museum, and publics, momentarily dislodging the normative distinctions between these roles; and yet, the authority of the museum remains stable. Sehgal can only play with the institutional context—and play within the space of the institution—as a kind of discursive theater. And perhaps that's the most that can be expected today—the museum as a quasi-public, quasi-private context that allows for weird experiences, aesthetic nourishment and edifying distraction. However, there is another approach, such as the activism of the Occupy Museums and Gulf Labor collectives, which have engaged in a number of occupations/sit-in protests inside and outside the Guggenheim to call attention to unfair labor practices at the Guggenheim's planned Abu Dhabi franchise museum. Or, the W.A.G.E. collective, which calls for art organizations and museums to provide artists with fair compensation for their artistic labor. Such examples of art activism are probably the most effective forms of post-institutional critique today, applying needed pressures upon institutions to operate ethically and as good citizens—at the local, regional, and global levels. The impacts of such activism upon the museums of the future, however, remain to be seen.

The critique of the museum can be understood not only as a performance of artistic criticality but also as a performance of the museum's tolerance of—and capacity to absorb—critical interrogation. It's important to point out that when museums invite artists to perform institutional critique, and artists accept such invitations, a kind of social contract is established wherein the limits of permission, tolerance, and criticality are negotiated and tested between the parties. Inevitably, however, there is a kind of feedback loop between artist and museum. The late Michael Asher— an artist central to the historical development of conceptualism and institutional critique—poignantly reminded us from the 1960s until his death in 2012 that museums are tautological institutions on conceptual, political, social, architectural, and other terms. Museums instrumentalize artists as purveyors of critique (just as artists instrumentalize museums). In this feedback loop of institutional permission and artists accepting that permission to critique the institution, the museum reproduces its own power, and a symbiotic relationship between institution and artist is established, with the artist engaged in a calculated trade-off between

empowerment and disempowerment. Andrea Fraser, a key artist associated with the emergence of institutional critique practices in the late 1980s and a pioneer of new forms of meta-performance as a means of interrogating and desublimating the repressed narratives of museums, was commissioned by the Whitney Museum to produce a new work for their Open Space series in 2016. Here is Fraser's description of the resultant project, *Down the River* (http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/OpenPlanAndreaFraser):

> "The Whitney Museum is New York's newest architectural landmark, enjoying a high-visibility location along the Hudson River and at the end of the High Line. Its glass-walled lobby welcomes the public with a promise of transparency and access. Inside, visitors find airy, light-filled spaces and terraces opening out to endless views. Public spaces share glass walls with offices, exposing functions often hidden from view. Yet, nowhere is the openness of the museum more dramatically constructed than this 18,200-square-foot space. Thirty-two miles to the north, in the town of Ossining, Sing Sing Correctional Facility is also located on the Hudson River. It is surrounded by thick, high walls topped with razor wire and movement into, out of, and within the maximum-security prison is strictly controlled. Inside, inmates serve sentences of up to life without parole in six-by-nine-foot cells. Sing Sing's A Block, almost six hundred feet long and with six hundred cells, is one of the largest prison housing units in the world. Since the 1970s, the United States has experienced a boom in both museum and prison expansion, with the number of each institution tripling nationwide. During the same period, studies estimate that museum attendance has grown by a factor of ten while the prison population has exploded by 700 percent, making the United States the world's largest jailor. Beyond this parallel growth, museums, and in particular art museums, would seem to share nothing with prisons. Art museums celebrate freedom and showcase invention. Prisons revoke freedom and punish transgression. Art museums collect and exhibit valued objects. Prisons confine vilified people. Art museums are designed by renowned architects as centerpieces of urban development. Prisons are built far from affluent urban areas, becoming all but invisible to those not directly touched by incarceration. And yet, despite (or perhaps because of) their extreme differences, art museums and prisons can be seen as two sides of the same coin in an increasingly polarized society where our public lives, and the institutions that define them, are sharply divided by race, class, and geography. The gulf that separates art museums and prisons, and our exposures to them, is a product of this polarization and may also help to perpetuate it. Down the River brings ambient sound recorded in Sing Sing's A Block to the Whitney's fifth floor to link museums and prisons across this social and geographical divide."
>
> —Andrea Fraser

Fraser is suggesting that all museums are in some way directly or indirectly complicit with this prison-industrial complex in the United States, perhaps even implying that there is a *prison-museum-industrial complex*. Michel Foucault's writings on institutions, the Englightenment, power, architecture, discipline, and punishment are clearly present in Fraser's discourse. I suppose that if one were to implicate museums in this unfortunate state of affairs, one would also have to implicate the economic, political, and ideological systems that underpin all aspects of social inequity in the world; everything is connected to everything else. There is nothing particularly new about the stark contrasts between the haves of contemporary art and have-nots in other walks of life; art is contradictory and has always embodied and also pointed to these disparities. And it should be at least acknowledged that Fraser is a relatively privileged—and certainly very respected—member of the contempo-

rary art intelligentsia (a brilliant thinker and writer), even if her art may not sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. I attended a special preview opening of Fraser's project at the Whitney, what one might characterize as a VIP event for friends and colleagues of the artist, and this event only seemed to reproduce precisely the ethos of exclusive museum sphere privilege that her project ostensibly sought to interrogate; this was probably just an inevitable byproduct of the broader paradoxes at play. Strolling through the nearly empty space— only speakers were installed on the ceilings, transmitting the ambient prison sounds recorded by Fraser—I began to observe other inner-circle art world cognoscenti observing me as I observed them, and it dawned upon me that indeed, I was imprisoned within an echo chamber of privilege, which invoked feelings not altogether dissimilar to those discussed earlier, when as a child I experienced the museum as a kind of prison. Maybe this was Fraser's point: that the privileged may also be imprisoned by their art temples, trapped by their own privilege, even if they/we understand the painful contradictions of our own privileges, and our freedoms. Fraser hoped to suggest that there is always a trade-off between the freedom we have to enjoy art and culture at our leisure, and the unfreedom of others. And yet even if visitors to the museum made these connections, and understood these broader social and cultural contradictions, it's quite unclear what these publics were meant to do with this knowledge. Would the knowledge be empowering for museum publics? We may be committed to social justice, but are art projects in museums the best way to bring about social justice? Is it an important starting point? And how might we assess this?

Conclusion: The Museum of the Future Is a Question

Ultimately, the future of the museum—as a mutable idea, as a changeable thing—is a question about a society's priorities. The primary mission of all public and private museums should be to serve publics. There are different publics and distinct museums serving those publics, even if global contemporary art museums tend to adopt analogous infrastructures and operating systems. Of course, patrons, philanthropists, and art collectors who establish their own private/public art museums are serving their own interests while also serving the public's interests; this contradiction, or paradox, is more of a human problem than it is the product of the arts spheres. It seems impossible to completely separate selflessness from some degree of self-interest. We must acknowledge, once again, that art and its systems have embodied various social and economic contradictions since the Enlightenment, and that the art museum embodies such paradoxes. Will these contradictions and paradoxes disappear in the museum of the future?

In the future…

Will there be more ethical museums, wherein the progressive values of art are also reflected in the actual infrastructures of museums? For instance, a post-

hierarchical museum wherein power is shared equally among all employees of the museum? Or is this merely just another utopian dream?
Will a diverse museum solve our diversity problems?
As we move from the experience economy to the attention economy toward a distraction economy, how will museums of the future keep our attention? Or, will there be different museums for distinct states of mind: the museum for focused people, the museum for distracted people, and so on and so forth?
Will there be bespoke museums to suit every mood: the museum for anxious people, the museum for tranquil people, the museum for depressed people, the museum for happy people, etc.?
Will there be a museum of artificial intelligence that is also operated by AI?
Will curator-bots replace human curators at museums?
Will the museum become an on-demand service delivered to us at home via a new technology?
Will we hallucinate the museum by taking a pill?
Will the museum of the future preserve the future?
Will there still be a future when the museum of the future arrives?

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