

# The Future of Museums and the Role of Museology

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## Introduction

Modern civilization has admitted to the idea that art and science are (sometimes) useless and disinterested in the practical problems of the world, because of their inability to stop certain processes or to influence them decisively. For art—where social and cognitive dissonance is directly obvious and openly commented upon—our civilization has closed the case by inventing an art that serves only itself: 'L'art pour l'art'. Hypocritical society accepted this rationalization, art historians were happy to end the obvious challenge to their 'fact'-blindness, and artists consented as it seemed to help them too. But art suffered because it was denied an active role in society. The same thing happened more or less to science, which was probably more free but now finds itself in the position of a servant, playing only the role of filling out the pattern dictated by the power-holders. Yet, we do know that this is not the inherent logic of either science or art. However disinterested in everyday practice they may seem, science and art only make sense if leading towards a change in behaviour and to new solutions to our problems. This statement is also true of philosophy which is as much science as it is art.

'Second wave-civilization', using the logic of rationalism and blinded by the conquering nature of industrialization, may have found this way of thinking usable (as it was once), but the worrisome fact is that nowadays we have to fight the same logic in very changed circumstances. The biggest restructuring of our civilization since its beginning is taking place with dramatic stresses. The logic of dialectics in our way of thinking and the idea of 'feedback' is not just an intellectual invention. Out of this causality McLuhan made a trans-scientific law: the medium is the Message. It helped us to see more clearly that a serious questioning of all institutions in the last quarter of the century is of vital importance for the future existence of our civilization.

Museums are no exception. First, they have become re-established, after centuries of existence (but in response to different reasons), as very important. More precise questioning shows that they are not God given and that they may or even should change for reasons which are becoming more and more clear. As the drama of contemporary society gains momentum, questions are posed about all the possible uses or usable possibilities that could be expected from such reformed museums. I believe that this critical mass of questions upon the future of the museum as an institution, and the quantity of proposed answers, has marked the birth of museology, which, with the exception of some pioneers, has spanned some twenty years. Futurology, which does not respond. One author calls this society 'the society of uncertainty'<sup>(2)</sup> thus adding to the very alarming term proposed by Alvin Toffler: 'The Era of Great Anxiety'. Another author, speaking of the future, says the following: 'Future shock is nothing more than the experience of product man lost in an age of process because he expects the future to be just a bigger last, not different. When it's not the same as they remember, people get upset.'<sup>(3)</sup>

So—apart from speaking of important things that concern the big issues of the continuation of identity balance—we may be dealing also with problems at a psychological, and almost curative, level. These neurotic syndromes of our time call for action. The self-defence system of social consciousness, too heavily burdened, ceased to function quite a long time ago, a fact that has become obvious only now. What has happened to us instead is a constant orientation towards soothing with the aid of drugs, a flight into illusions. This is a civilizational implosion through a decadent materialism and a use of vital forces only to embellish death. The adolescence of mankind, or better still, of its power holders, does not comprise the uneasiness of existential responsibility. Nowadays it may have become obvious that the main feature of the nature of museum institutions (and other similar institutions) is a mission of continuation: whatever they contain or speak of, their task is to continue. It certainly looks rather up-to-date as an explanation and it is when explained, but we recognize this as a striving for the eternity

of the institution. It is one of the most universal primary impulses, and when applied to social and cultural values, they become unbearably ambitious and even ruthless in achieving their aims. New museums which are just new in their architecture and the technology applied just become more effective in this vanity affair. But they may also be new in their conception and may have a very responsible attitude which goes as far as re-forming their own public, so that, all together, they do the real job. And the real job is quality of living, tolerance, dignity of diversities, etc.

The First World War ended the 'cosmic optimism' (as Toffler puts it) of the 19th century. A short period of a new faith ended in the holocaust of the war that followed. People never managed to adjust to the frantic growth of the post-industrial revolution era and continued to live spiritually holding on to past values. It does not even look like a crisis, as some are likely never to catch up. Insecurity is the result. People need reassurance and a feeling of certainty. We find ourselves in the cockpit of a flying jet, with no one around, and with only a car driver's licence in our pocket.

Our situation is certainly more complex than that, but it may end in a very simple tragedy. The discontented world is trying to cure itself and regain balance and command by inventing all sorts of new skills and theoretical bodies. It is not just a trend, it is a movement along a path that is not supposed to be dead-ended. The heritage science we are talking about is just one of the skills, probably with much wider aspirations. The task that I would like to assign to it is to encompass everything within the same area of preservation of the past including all the parallel and alternative ideas. People need the synthesis of diverse data, information and knowledge into a plausible experience which helps understanding and living. They are offered too much which is useless—a puzzle with parts that no one meant to match. There is more knowledge in the world than ever before, yet one could say it is just the opposite with wisdom. That may be true or not, prudence surely does not correspond with the available memory. There is obviously a process in production that we miss, a phase where data is combined into information and where an information collage produces a message. Who is going to produce that message? Certainly not the traditional museums. People need awareness of the processes surrounding them, they need useful understanding of the world in which they live in order to accept it. They are so deeply conditioned by the traditional context they are educated in that they refuse everything that does not fit the secure old pattern. So museums, for instance, have the double task of changing themselves and of galvanizing their public to use museums for their natural requirements.

We need institutions and actions which would make hope possible again. We also need institutions which would be convincing in arguing corrections to what is being done with identities in the world. As users we need to counteract, that is, to oppose and prevent, a direct action. The mentality of constant profit with no concern for other people's future is spreading beyond the class of power-holders. Any of these actions can be undertaken only with the help of the past: experience, arguments, directional signs—if the past survives, we shall survive. As the needs are rather clear, the logic will guarantee that someone will fulfil them. It is still curious to see how blind museum people are, thinking that they alone are in charge. The past is a well where anybody who is thirsty can find fresh wisdom.

### **Theory—Helping the Future Happen**

It has never been clearly said, but it may seem logical after the previous pages, that theory (as time goes by) takes on a much more active attitude. Its ambition is not really creation, but a certain catalytic role. And this is a rather slippery aspiration, as theory may become a dangerous misunderstanding if directly applied to practice. Yet, time is passing and the need to catch up with some processes is steadily growing. In this respect, with all the misunderstandings we have experienced, our civilization is the first and unique; as Malraux has said, it has been 'the first to separate the unattainable from religion and superstition so as to be able to ask questions'.<sup>(4)</sup> And when Malraux explains himself writing about the Imaginary Museum, one could probably add some contemporary experiences, or substitute some ready experiments where he has only vaguely pointed the direction. Personally—even without speaking of the theory as of a *religio curatoris*—I would pronounce him a prophet of the entire field of heritage protection. It was he who put the art at the end of the development: the Imaginary Museum, he suggested,

announces the existence of some era of 'art in front of which we have stayed perplexed ever since we could not identify it with immortality'.<sup>(5)</sup>

An analysis of the history of heritage institutions shows their development characterized by convergence; instead of former divided areas and utter diversification, we speak of their tasks within shared *areas of resonance*. Therefore, in response to an institutional configuration that consists more and more of custom-programmed institutions, the immediate impression is of the uselessness of rules (some so-called sciences achieved that status rather elegantly the moment they created the critical mass of rules and models). Museums began as memory, then became more explicitly treasuries (a tendency retained throughout further development); the next phase was curiosity and science, and then they took up more evocative values and became concerned more and more with the age and historical values. In my opinion we are, for the majority of tendencies within the era of documenting values, still nourishing the idea of prestige and importance. A rather paradoxical position: those are our museums but made because of the others. It is like draining the budget to the bottom, and buying a fancy car just to make the neighbours jealous. With museums it is much more serious. No wonder people are happy with this change in the museum world because it is more keen than ever to follow us and 'take notes'. But where are we going? A responsible curator must ask the question and demand an answer. Without being too pathetic, one may say that this obedient documenting could become interesting or useful if there were still anybody to use it. Sometimes it is not enough to document, but necessary to oppose and correct. If museums have the knowledge and the accumulated experience of the past, should not *they* be obliged to use it for the better good of society? If our theory explains that fact with good, sound arguments, it might compel museum people to open the windows of their marble temples—and I say I would love it. Then we can talk about the future. And, besides, any future is more beautiful than the past. We, as intellectual beings who are given the gift of dream, may finally appreciate that only the future holds promises. Closed within the pattern of dead-end streets of our present, we lose the ability and the will to foresee and predict, and it creates 'a lack of feedforward (which) estranges us from ourselves'.<sup>(6)</sup>

A new theory (I refuse to talk about any that we know) must have the quality to explain the past logically, it must fit the present and it surely must be useful for the future. Even speaking about the destiny of museums, separately from all similar problems, gives us an appropriate opportunity to affirm the legitimacy of the theory itself. Indeed, any sort of speculation upon the future of institutions must use the intellectual apparatus, and that is, by definition, science. Theory does not perform prophecy. It gathers knowledge, analyses it and draws up conclusions. As pronounced in *\_the title*, theory helps practice to move faster, sometimes indicating what the focus of action could be. The appearance of theory is a response to the speed of changes. Jules Verne, for example, as McLuhan tells us,<sup>(7)</sup> failed to predict the right time of the appearance of television, which according to him should have happened in the 29th century. Thus, it would be imaginable that professional speculation would never gain enough importance in a slower world to aspire to or earn the status of science. But circumstances which lead to having a theory are far from being exclusively professional. Nevertheless, establishing a theory to respond to new circumstances implies the necessary confidence in the protagonists. What may be proposed is also a 'hypothetical leap'<sup>(8)</sup>—anticipation stemming from intuition.

Much in the future for which we are trying to prepare ourselves, will be dependent upon the use of technology. We have accepted technology in all heritage institutions, but so far we are as a whole successfully resisting its full impact. It has not changed the nature of the majority of *heritage institutions*. Like Kenneth Hudson says: 'They are doing the same old thing using new means'. Technology has ever been a destiny of our civilization and of its museums alike. What we expect theory to do is to clarify that relationship, to advise the right level of usage and the right ways of usage. On a more general level, the importance of technology lies within the total change of circumstances. Technology has a rather clear perspective of its abilities, but the practice of our heritage institutions is not able to adjust to present possibilities. Technology offers much more than the prospect of greater recording capacities and faster retrieval. It will go, on the one hand, towards still more high-fidelity in reproducing reality, but on the other hand, it will suggest and offer enormous flexibility for any *creative* usage. It may increase still further the level of museum hyperrealism, which in itself is a vice and is a quality of modern museums.

Part of the problem is the fact that a museum (for instance) focuses upon different details and situations of reality with such complete insight that one always discovers in these presentations more than reality gives away. As technology offers us the constant temptation of seeing behind the usually obvious and beneath the usually exposed, so this hyperrealism becomes a significant element of any theoretical speculation and, well in accordance to McLuhan's rule, changes the nature of institutions.

As things are now, technology only adds to the chaos of massive knowledge by the heritage action (be it the institutional scene or more than that) wishes to find itself. It is the human factor that blocks the profit from it. It is rather obvious, if not logical, that perfection, ability and capacity all deal with quantity and not with quality. That *technological trap* (any technology may be taken for its own sake and may be self-serving, like administration for instance) is inevitable if we let ourselves be guided by it. To avoid it we need a know-how that treats itself with a critical, analytical apparatus and with the analysis of professional experience. And that is theory.

We are speaking of a 'society of total information', a society that comprises a balance that we seem to be losing for good. Heritage institutions should become a substantial mechanism in keeping the balance there and should play an active role in this process. As far as heritage action is concerned (be that institutional or informal), it will itself balance between the extremes of technological hyperrealistic perfection and the most relaxed village-like informality: between the total illusion and the most down-to-earth preoccupation with the 'quotidiana'. Technology will always impose itself, but if we do not yield totally, we may augment our chances of returning to the mythological, poetical, irrational and non-functional. Thus gaining the balance through the creative process.

A big dividing paradigm of rationalism, as one author puts it, that confronted science and philosophy, materialism and idealism, facts and values, governed in the 18th century and its dominance is decreasing only now. The future will be again the time of a great synthesis. The man of the future will integrate in his spiritual and practical life the past and the present. A long explanation would probably be more convincing in throwing some light on the creative future of heritage institutions, their close relation to art and their art-like functioning. The close similarity between an and the museum message has already been mentioned in literature, but there is still some way to go for heritage institutions. Like art, they have to become a unity of Dionysian and Apollonian principles. Art is, as Nietzsche tells us: 'The most complete acceptance of life and the highest evidence of man'. Nietzsche adds also that art has a real meaning for living because 'the world and the existence gain their justification only as an aesthetic problem. Only thanks to art existence becomes bearable, truth becomes bearable and overcoming of pessimism becomes possible'. He may well have talked about museums, provided that art and aesthetics be mentioned and related to communication processes and not to, say, the way individual objects are treated in exhibitions.

The new theory that tries to help the usable future of heritage institutions to happen will succeed in establishing that a museum job, a curatorial job for instance (especially the one within the communication processes), is inevitably a creative one. One day, it will become evident that for communication work in museums and institutions alike, one will certainly have to be not only educated, but also talented. Heritage institutions will become highly *informatise*, augmenting their documentation capacity almost to perfection. But to make real profit out of it, they will become the eighth art—a mixture of documentation centre, traditional museum, library, theatre, creative workshop and leisure facility. New institutions will be different from the models we have in mind; custom institutions, created according to necessarily specific circumstances to respond to naturally specific needs, will deny any rule we would like to establish. They will grow where the real need is and out of a specific environment.

The nonsense of division between movable and immovable heritage will disappear when confronted with free action. What will matter will be entity (the identity in its broadest possible interpretation and context) that needs continuation. Heritage institutions will be more and more the core of action trying to make things happen where they are needed, where they have the biggest impact. Their goal, in a very art-like manner, would be to have the process happen in people's minds. There, and only there, the heritage action will try to act as a guru of a new (or newly discovered) spiritual sphere, reaching the points of awareness

and wisdom, which will question any need of institutions or directed orientation. The aim is unattainable, like any ideal, but so was the down-to-earth attitude of traditional museums; their addiction to material evidence, to simple prestige and to superficial aesthetics was vain as it could only be. Yet the goal was nothing less than eternity. It is teaching the rhinoceros how to fly. Joffre said with elegant simplicity the beautiful truth: 'Our only eternity is mankind'.

Heritage institutions and heritage actions will finally be able to justify the imposing potential of technology, using it creatively for their goals. They will prove that technology has still to be discovered: the medium of museums to which it has been proposed and by which it has been misused did not take the challenge of its full capacity. One has to know, however, that the future will be benevolent as is suggested by the very logic (not idealism this time!) which means that it will be eclectic in approach and will leave all the concepts live as long as they can prove their productiveness. And there will always be people who would rather be using a laser for digging the ground than for its inherent performances.

The future of museums has to contend with the phenomenon of death, as it is a part of our life-cycle. By doing so, it will be possible to break with the exhausting obligation to keep the physical evidence alive. And it will enable us also to search for eternity where we can find it. This also comprises the death of museums and similar institutions, ideally, through their fulfillment—through their closing the circle and coming back to life, thus decreasing the need for them. Even if we consent to the materialistic logic of traditional heritage institutions, creating a pharaoh's grave for some other afterlife, or for some other life which might come, we see now that the traditional way has outlasted itself. Before the spaceship Earth sinks, to paraphrase Buckminster Fuller, we should launch some lifeboats in the cosmic ocean. What can we or what shall we take with us? The idea is: everything that, we are, in the totality of time and space, but the trunkspace available will necessarily call for a very sublime baggage.

#### Notes:

1. Kenneth Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).
2. Simon Nora and Alain Mine, *L'informatisation de la societe* (Paris, 1978), La Documentation Franchise.
3. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).
4. Andre Malraux, *Glava od obsidijana* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1974).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Shamberg, *op. cit.* note 3.
7. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage, An Inventory of Effects* (Bantam Books Inc., 1967).
8. George Gilder, *Potreba za verom* (Beograd: Pregled, 1982), No. 217.

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