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Dr. Peter Osborne*

Abstract

This paper considers the effects upon art museums of the historical condition of a global contemporaneity to which they are subjected today. The main difference, it is argued, concerns the forms of universality that art museums articulate and to which they aspire. The paper sets out from a brief review of the increasingly established 'critique of the museum' undertaken in recent decades, which is a critique of the 19th century conception a 'universal museum'. It proceeds via reflection upon the two-fold and homologous character of the totality project by that conception – the artwork as a totality and history as a totality – in contrast to the theoretical heterogeneity of the forms of unity of the periodizing categories that are deployed by art history today. The received forms of totality are revealed to be illusory or fictive projections. However, it is argued, rather than representing a dissolution of the aspiration to universality of the museum, as such, these heterogeneous forms become elements in a new ongoing epistemological and political constructivism through which cultural identities are formed. The new museums of global contemporaneity thus bring to self-consciousness the necessity of the 'illusions of totality' involved in both artistic and historical experience, along with their essentially imaginary quality.

Keywords

Contemporary; digitalization; global; universality; universal museum.

Resumo

Este artigo considera os efeitos sobre os museus de arte da condição histórica de uma contemporaneidade global, à qual estão hoje sujeitos. A principal diferença, argumenta-se, diz respeito às formas de universalidade que os museus de arte articulam e às quais aspiram. O artigo parte de uma breve revisão da cada vez mais comum "crítica do museu" empreendida nas últimas décadas, que é uma crítica da concepção de um "museu universal" do século XIX. Ele procede refletindo sobre o caráter duplo e homólogo do projeto de totalidade desta concepção – a obra de arte como uma totalidade e a história como uma totalidade – em contraste com a heterogeneidade teórica das formas de unidade das categorias de periodização que são desenvolvidas pela história da arte hoje. As formas de totalidade herdadas revelaram-se projeções ilusórias ou fictícias. Entretanto, argumenta-se, em vez de representar uma dissolução da aspiração à universalidade do museu, como tal, essas formas heterogêneas transformaram-se em elementos de um novo construtivismo epistemológico e político em curso, por meio do qual identidades culturais são criadas. Os novos museus da contemporaneidade global trazem assim à autoconsciência a necessidade das "ilusões da totalidade" envolvidas tanto na experiência artística com na histórica, juntamente com sua qualidade essencialmente imaginária.

Palavras-chave

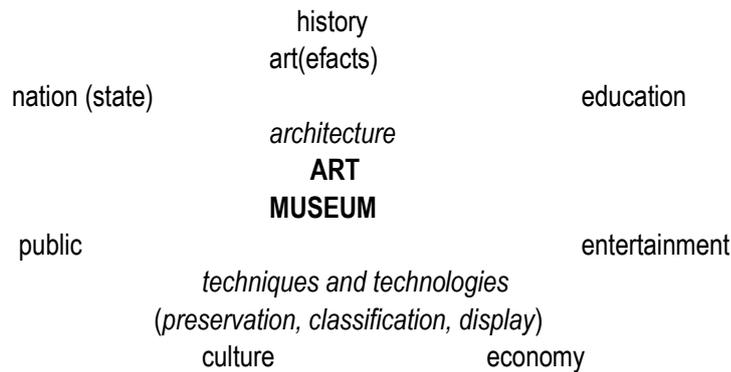
Contemporâneo; digitalização; global; universalidade; museu universal.

There is a deep temporal disjunction at the heart of the proposal of the ‘universal museum’ as topic for discussion today¹. On the one hand, the topic appears to be an archival or an archeological one: pertaining to the past, in its “definitively finished” sense. As a 19th century European ideal, the idea of the universal museum, many would say, is dead; it is no longer a living intellectual or cultural actuality. It is a topic for historians, in the pejorative sense. Indeed, one might even say, paradoxically (and here, of course, things already become more complicated), that it is an object of merely *museological* interest, the prime exhibit in a “museum of museums”, perhaps – although this does not necessarily redeem it, of course. On the other hand, however, in self-consciously reviving the theme of the universal under the technological, economic and geopolitical conditions of the present – and the related conditions known as “digitalization” and “globalization” in particular – the topic of the universal museum might be conceived as a radically open and contemporary one, as almost futuristic in fact: that is to say, as pertaining to a *new form of universality* beyond the restricted horizons of the 19th century European idea, a universality that is historically actualizable for the first time, in some new way.

One might call the first point of view that of the historicism of the “end of the museum”, and the second (equally historicist in the chronological form of its time-consciousness, but forward-rather than backward-looking) that of the “progressivism” of the “new museum”. Between these two points of view, which are actually those of a single standpoint looking out in opposite directions, there lies a fundamental theoretical continuity. Neither is by itself satisfactory as a perspective on the universality of the museum, but nor, I believe, do they add up together to an “integral” whole – even if we insert between them, as we must, the *critique of the museum* as their articulating hinge; although it is the main ideological function of Museum Studies, as an intellectual discipline, to produce such a unity. For the current historical changes in the conditions of museums, I want to suggest, are such as to require a more fundamental rethinking of the concept of the museum itself.

Everything depends on how one construes the “universality” of the so-called universal museum. (In fact, the term “universal” in the phrase “universal museum” is already somewhat redundant, or excessive, since in its now-classically-modern, early 19th century sense, the museum – and its paradigmatic type, the *art* museum, in particular – was conceived as universal, as such. In this context, “universal museum” is a kind of pleonasm. Or, alternatively, it could be considered to mark the passing of the *presumption* of universality, and hence in a sense already the “end” of the actualizability of the museum in its original sense). Different conceptions of universality lead to different conceptions of the universal museum. Everything also depends, of course, upon *which* universals one takes to be primarily at stake in the universality of the museum: *art, culture, nation* (nation-state), *public* and *history*, at least, certainly, at the outset; along with, more recently, *education, entertainment* and *economy*; but also, crucially, *architecture* as the spatial mediation and point of condensation of these other terms, in their specifically museological or “preservative” function; and hence also, in a more subterranean but no less crucial way, *techniques* and *technologies* of preservation, classification and display.

The museum thus lies at the centre of a constellation of universals, looking something like this:



The question of the universality of the museum is thus a question of the *relational totality* or *constellation* of these universals as embedded in and articulated by the historical practices of museums. It is important here to note the ambiguity in the term “condition” in the phrase “the condition of the museum”, which allows it to refer both to (i) that which conditions the museum – and hence which stands, logically at least, outside of and prior to it, as in Kant’s “conditions of possibility” (here, the outer circle of the constellation) – and (ii) the “state of being” (the condition) of the thing that is conditioned, here, the museum itself, down to the level of its material fabric, the state of the building (does the roof leak?), which so often stands in metonymically for the state of the institution. Indeed, one might (mistakenly) be led to believe that all is well in the world of museums because there are lots of shiny new ones being built, in which the roofs don’t (often) leak. But what is going on inside them, and how they are functioning as museums – especially, art museums – is another matter, of course.

One thing, at least, is clear: the burden of the universality of the museum previously carried by the universality of the modern concept of art (and the concept of the masterpiece, in particular) has been both shifted onto and dispersed amongst a range of other more diffuse cultural, economic and political functions, the *forms* of universality of which are quite different.

The ambiguity of the term “condition” refers us, dialectically, to the *internality* of the conditioning to the conditioned (or the internalization of the conditioning by the conditioned), such that to speak of the “condition of the museum” is to speak *at once* of the (ontological) state of the museum – what it is – and of all (external to it) that conditions or determines it as a ‘museum’. (This is why there are no boundaries on my diagram, above). It is in this double sense that I speak here of ‘global contemporaneity’ as a condition of the museum today, although I shall say nothing about its specific manifestations *within* particular museums here. Rather, I am rather concerned to theorize the changing forms of universality that are at stake and the problems and the tasks they pose for museums.

Critique of the art museum in its “universal” function as a depository of the artistic manifestations of a universal history

The critique of the art museum in its main historical instantiations (from the Louvre to the Museum of Modern Art, New York) is by now well established, in a range of aspects. Textually, one may cite, from

the first half of the 20th century, a stream running from Paul Valéry's famous 1923 essay, *The Problems of Museums*, via Walter Benjamin (*Eduard Fuch, Collector and Historian*, 1937) and André Malraux (*Museum Without Walls*, 1947) to Theodor W. Adorno (*Valéry Proust Museum*, 1953). In the 1960s and 1970s, these considerations were radicalized from the standpoints of contemporary art and politics alike, in Robert Smithson (*Void Thoughts on Museums*, 1967; *Cultural Confinement*, 1972), Marcel Broodthaers (*Museum of Modern Art*, 1968–1972), Daniel Buren (*Function of the Museum*, 1970), Hans Haacke (*MOMA Poll*, 1970) and the 1969 Art Workers Coalition, in New York, to name only a few highlights in a gathering crowd. These latter works, leading to the consolidation of the artistic genre of institutional critique, provided the sociological perspective for the subsequent sub-discipline of Cultural Studies, known as Museum Studies (later, more broadly, Heritage Studies – the shift is symptomatic), emergent during the 1980s and 1990s, within which the standpoint of critique largely moved away from art itself to economic and ideological analyses of the culture industry, in increasingly more radical inter- and transnational (especially post-colonial) – frames. These perspectives have subsequently, increasingly, been appropriated and institutionalized in modified forms by state funding bodies. (A multiculturalist perspective on “heritage” is a prevalent theme in European Research Council funding of the arts and humanities, for example, as well in national research funding bodies, as governments rush to tidy up and repackage the remnants of imperial “nations”) (Osborne, 2013: 21–32). This has caused something of a crisis in what remains of a “critical” Museum Studies.

Conceptually, three main themes stand out in these texts.

1. All of the *artistic* critiques of the art museum from the 1920s to the 1970s – from Valéry to Smithson – thematize the image of the museum as a mausoleum or a graveyard of art. The museum decontextualizes art by removing it from its living contexts and re-presenting it as emblematic of universal values. This is an extension of the historical avant-garde critique of the separation of “art” from “life”, albeit, in Valéry's case from the aestheticist standpoint of a life immanent to art – that absolutization of art for art's sake from which (as Benjamin argued in his essay on Surrealism) the historical avant-garde itself sprung. Yet it is precisely this de-contextualization that *constitutes* “art” in its modern sense, as an independent (aesthetic and metaphysical) value, as Valéry himself recognized, when he famously wrote of painting and sculpture as ‘orphans’, their dead mother being architecture – in particular, the renaissance architecture from which they were torn. From this standpoint, the art museum constitutes art in its modern, autonomous sense as always already dead. This would mean that what Robert Smithson bemoaned as happening to the art of the 1960s is in fact a constitutive feature of “art” itself. “Museums are tombs”, Robert Smithson wrote in *Some Void Thoughts on Museums*, “and it looks like everything is turning into a museum. Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues. Art settles into a stupendous inertia”. From this point of view, Conceptual art, which was for so many at the time viewed as an attempt to *escape* the reduction of art to what Smithson later called the “visual fodder and transportable merchandise” of the museum, was in fact itself just another part of what he called the “metaphysical junkyard” of the museum: “Categorical miasmas? Intellectual rubbish? Specific intervals of visual desolation? ... The wasted remains of ontology, cosmology, and epistemology” still offering “a ground for art”, as he put it in *Cultural Confinement* (1972) (Smithson, 1996: 156). In 1966, he also represented this waste as *A Heap of Language*, in advance of the famous works by Lewitt, Kosuth and others, of which this work would come to be seen a cogent philosophical critique.

2. Ever since Benjamin's thoughts on technological reproducibility and the "afterlife" of artworks in the 1930s, there has also been a strong photographic theme to the critique of the museum as a depository of auratic objects, the universality of which somehow adhere in their unique materialities. This is summed up in André Malraux's photographic idea of "the museum without walls". Photographic reproduction, the argument goes, replaces the museum, while reducing all works to images.

Such a museum, Douglas Crimp later argued, in the late 1970s, allowed artists to make a new art of collage and assemblage out of "the ruins of the museum" – he was thinking in particular of Robert Rauschenberg – an art that was starting to be conceived at that time as the "postmodern" art of what Boris Groys has called *Equal Aesthetic Rights*. Here, the original historical function of the museum in contributing to a universal history of mankind is discarded in favour of the generation of the present through "comparison between the old and the new" in which the new functions within the museum context, as "a reaffirmation of the fundamental aesthetic equality of all images in a historically given context" (Crimp, 1993: 44-65; Groys, 2008: 20-21; Groys, 2013: 141-150).

This aesthetic leveling, produced by the photographic, is radicalized in the context of digitalization, whereby the universality of the museum as itself a medium (the "universal" medium of "art") is transferred to the computer as the new universal medium, as such. In Friedrich Kittler's words: "as a virtual museum, an architectural entity that arose from the death of architecture (following Valéry's narrative – PO) could dissolve in the filigree micrometers of computer architecture" (Kittler, 1996: 71). Note here how it is the concept of architecture that sustains the continuity of function between the museum and the computer as universal media. Kittler worries, though, that the presentational emphasis on "user-interfaces" in the instrumentalization of digital archiving – rather than an interest in digital "architectures" themselves – maintains a cultural illiteracy about software, and merely appends the digital to the increasingly hybridized "aesthetic" media of museums, rather than transforming it more fundamentally along lines made possible by its new technological form, which remains largely publicly illegible. This is the *aesthetic capture of the digital* that characterizes so many "interactive" displays.

It is the role of digitalization in communications technologies within global political economy (as a condition and element of globalization), however, that most fundamentally affects the idea of the museum as a repository of artefacts of a universal history, in so far as globalization *changes the structure of the concept of history itself*.

This leads me to my final theme in the received critique of the museum: the political critique of the exclusionary universals of an art history grounded in 19th and early 20th century canons.

3. The often individualistic artist's critique of the deathly, classificatory "void" of the museum (which corresponded in Smithson's version with the moment of New York MoMA's brief functioning as a museum of *contemporary* as well as "modern" art, in its immediate appropriation of conceptual art) has co-existed since the late 1960s with what is actually a contradictory critical tendency: namely, the critique of the forms of *social exclusion* that were constitutive of the canon of the Western art museum as a *selection* of works. Preservation, classification and display are preceded by selection: the fundamental

curatorial act. These were, and remain, primarily feminist and multiculturalist critiques based on arguments about the public function of museums within liberal-democratic societies. They have at their base critiques of the social and geo-political (for which read “colonial” or “Eurocentric”) presuppositions of an art history grounded in 19th and early 20th century bourgeois canons, which rapidly came to include much of the avant-garde.

The “aesthetic” defense of the existing canon to which these attacks gave rise draws attention to the dual standpoint or double function of the museum as at once a repository of masterpieces and the evidential basis for the construction of a “total” art history. Think, for example, of the debates about the consecutive Whitney Biennales of 1993 and 1995; or the relationship between Okwui Enwezor’s documenta 11 and Roger Buergel’s documenta 12: the political break followed by a mediated aesthetic reaction. These are two formally quite different, indeed potentially contradictory, functions, which nonetheless work ideologically to reinforce one another: two illusions of totality – the *work of art* and *history* – and two cross-coded forms of universality: *intensive* and *extensive*, respectively. The former emphasizes uniqueness; the latter stresses comparison within a developing finite whole. Through their relations, the concept of art is constituted at two separate but equally necessary levels: transcendental and empirical. The absolute universality of the former (what in *The Invisible Masterpiece: The Modern Myth of Art*, 1998, Hans Belting (2001) called “absolute art”) is complemented by the relative universalities of the latter’s periodizations; and these different periodizations themselves depend upon different forms of universality, or logical forms of unity. Thus, returning to my opening point about the multiplicity of different forms of universality – which appear here, formally, as different logical forms of unity – if we look at the history of Western art since the 18th century, we find a wide variety of different forms of unity: from collective to distributive unity, or from traditional Aristotelian logical classification to the retrospective construction of the conceptual unity of selected empirical historical totalities (in an Adornian modernist art history, for example)².

Periodization	Mediating principle(s)	Form of unity
Classicism	hierarchy of genres of subject matter	collective unity / subsumption: logic of specification
Romanticism	primacy of the individual work	fragment (image of the absent whole)
Aestheticism/ Aesthetic modernism	aesthetic intensities of modern life	aesthetic identity
Modernism of avant-gardes	isms of movements	groups
Formalist modernism	mediums	species (cf. classicism)

Generic modernism 1	["readymade" as negative meta-medium / vanishing mediator of the destruction of mediums]	proper name
"Contemporary art" / generic modernism 2: a dialectic of modernisms	critical <i>isms</i> and series	distributive unities

Table 1: Art Historical Periodization and Forms of Unity

We can see here the radical *theoretical heterogeneity* of the different periodizing categories that make up art's history today.

As Adorno recognized, it is only retrospectively that the concept of art acquires any kind of unity, and this unity is therefore, in his words, "not abstract", but "presupposes concrete analyses, [n]ot as proofs and examples but as its own condition". The idea of art is given through each work, but no individual work is adequate to this idea. Furthermore, this ongoing retrospective and reflective totalization is necessarily *open, fractured, incomplete* and therefore inherently *speculative*:

The definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but it is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wants to be, and perhaps can, become. (...) Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. (...) Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not (...) Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form (Adorno, 1997, p. 2-3).

However, this intellectual process of ongoing retrospective unification, grounded on the open present of "what [art] wants to be, and perhaps can, become" is problematized by the lack of a single subject-position from which to enact such unification within a historical process characterized by globalization. It is this problematization that makes all such unifications at once inherently experimental, partial and speculative³.

Museums of the global contemporary?

Having emerged as a self-designating periodizing term after 1945, of a quasi-epochal kind (much like "renaissance" self-designated its present as the new beginning of a rebirth of ancient culture), thereby gradually condemning the established referents of "modern" to the past, the structure of contemporaneity is changing. Indeed, the very idea of contemporaneity as a *condition* is new. At the same time, the widespread, market-based diffusion of the term in the artworld has placed it in danger of being emptied out of its increasingly complex temporal-existential, social and political meanings, by being treated as a simple label or periodizing category, within a common chronological time. This is of particular concern because what seems distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of contemporaneity as a coming together not "in" time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together "in time" with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of different, but equally "present",

temporalities, creating a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times. Globalization *subjects us* to these new contemporaneities.

This is not a simple combination of different times, but a fusion of a geo-politically diffuse multiplicity of social times, combined within the present of constitutively problematic, speculative or fictional “subjects” of historical experience. This problematically disjunctive conjunction is covered over by the straightforward, historicist use of “contemporary” as a periodizing term, in the manner in which it is encountered within mainstream art history, in its stabilization of the distinction between modern and contemporary art. Although, within this discourse, as a repressed register of the continual historical movement of the present, we nonetheless find an increasing number of *competing* periodizations of contemporary art. The competition between these conceptions registers their epistemologically constructive and politically over-determined characters.

It is the epistemological and political constructivism of these conceptions that makes possible the active contribution of the “new” art museums to what Groys calls “the generation of the present”. However, Groys conceives this constructive generation to be subjected to a field of “equal aesthetic rights” carried forward from the ahistorically universal aspect of the “old” universal museum (the collection of masterpieces, each equally unique), which he reaffirms as a bulwark against the *mediatic* “dictatorship of contemporary taste”. Groys thereby actively *dehistoricizes* the museum at the very moment of its actually most historically constructive “contemporaneity”, since he identifies the contemporary with a co-presence without structural disjunction. Groys thereby restores the “illusion of totality” of the individual work *without* the self-consciousness of its illusory or fictional character, from which its epistemologically and politically critical function derives. In Adorno's most compressed definition: art simply is self-conscious illusion. Groys gives up the illusion of the totality of history, but he holds on to the illusion of the totality of each individual artwork.

The new museums of global contemporaneity would bring to self-consciousness the *necessity of the illusions* of totality in both art and history by drawing attention to their constructed, fictional characters, as self-enclosing articulations of specific differences – art-historically and socio-historically, respectively. As such, they would invite their publics to themselves engage in the imaginary processes of such constructions. This is one cultural dimension of the process of formation of political identities.

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Notas

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² This table is taken from Peter Osborne (2013: 86).

³ See the sections on ‘Globe and World’ and ‘Contemporaneity as Historical Time’ in Peter Osborne (2018: 3–23).

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