

**Jean-Paul Martinon, “Museum and Restlessness,” in Hugh H. Genoways, ed., *Museum Philosophy for the Twentieth-first Century* (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 59-69, © Alta Mira Press, 2006.**

The central question of this book (what underlying philosophy/mission should museums pursue in the first half of the 21st century?) calls for a prediction, the revelation of a secret unbeknown to museums. It calls for a prescriptive utterance that will determine or shape their future. *This is* the underlying philosophy that museums should pursue in the future. And the future is short. This book refers only to the first half of the 21st century, a mere forty-six years from 2004. This invitation to prediction raises a number of questions: From which horizon of expectation does this question arise? Are forty to fifty years the maximum length of time a museum’s mission statement holds currency? How and from where does one make a statement about the future of museums? Who is entitled to prophesize, predict, or project what will happen to museums in the future? What conception of the future is needed to make such a prediction? What does it mean to predict the future of an institution that retains as its main task that of preserving a heritage *for the future*?

Considering these issues, the only response that can perhaps be put forward to the central question of this book is this—If there is one single “thing” museums should pursue in the first half of the 21st century, it is to stop acknowledging that they have a future. Museums have no future and will still have no future in 2050. To address this issue in a satisfactory manner would require a lengthy analysis that cannot be included in such a short essay.<sup>i</sup> The only argument that this essay can put forward is, therefore, this—Museums have no future because they can no longer sustain a historical conception of the future; they can only sustain an (a)historical conception of restlessness. How to begin thinking in those terms?

My remark that museums have no future is deliberately provocative. I am not implying here that museums should be closed or that museums are no longer relevant. I do not imply either that it is impossible to make predictions or that there are no longer any prophets, accountants, or cultural commentators capable of making predictions or projections. Practical decisions have to be made and these are always based on a certain prosopopoean<sup>ii</sup> vision of the future. On the contrary, when

I write that museums have no future, this simply means that museums are no longer in a situation to assert what they understand by time and that one can no longer think of the future the way art historians and museum curators formerly thought of the future in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century understood time as already interpreted, as a social and historical phenomenon. It defined the future within the context of notions such as succession, periodicity, or duration. As such, the future was conceived as a temporal category within a predetermined structure. It was always a future-present, one that depended on a strict temporal and historical (linear) logic that clearly established what was in the past and what lay (ahead) in the future. The future was one element within the dominant linguistic mode of the time—the narrative. To put it extremely briefly, it conceived the future as another social or historical time (distant or not) that situated itself in the present.

As one of the key institutions of the nineteenth century, the museum was at the center of this structured definition of time. The traditional temporal ideology of the museum was to situate itself in relation to both a past, which it preserved, and a future into which it projected the past it contained. In this way, it turned time into a grand narrative of progress, an inexorable movement that lead the visitor through a continuous series of galleries. Inside these arcades, art was segregated into specific and clearly defined movements, orchestrated by a few protagonists. And within this self-creating chain with clear points of rupture and continuance, the future was the unquestioned extension of the grand narrative, one that could only be understood as the continuation of these periodicities and discontinuities. The old teleological process<sup>iii</sup> could only lead to projections, predictions, and prophecies.

Today, the museum is forced to think of the future outside of these dusty categories. Beyond the empirical necessities of financial constraints and issues of maintenance, the museum must think of a finer kind of future. The only future it can contemplate today is that of the setting into motion of difference, that which opens itself, that which comes. If the museum is serious about the presentation of its collection, the preservation of “the past,” its history, then it must think of the future quite simply, but most definitely as the opening of space itself, what the philosopher Jacques Derrida understands by *l'à-venir*, the “to-come”<sup>iv</sup>. This is not “the future” of museums, this is the museum as it deals with the unravelling of temporality. It is

what, inside, but also outside of the museum, in an unidentifiable location, space takes from itself; the way space distances itself within itself and take place. In other words, it is that which, in the museum opens space—the space of the work of art, the space of and for the viewer. This has nothing to do with the endless expansions of collections or the museum’s ability to open up new galleries, but rather with the space the museum fosters to maintain its activity, to generate its own distinctive experience. This has also nothing to do with succession, duration, or extension, and certainly not with beginnings, middles, and identifiable ends. This has to do with the unfolding or the exposure that takes place *at every instant*, at every showing. It is the disjuncting of temporality here *or there* in the gallery and this, no matter what or to whom it is exposed.

When thinking of the museum in relation to this unfolding of temporality, one is in fact not thinking of the future (utopian or dystopian) of the museum per se, but of its event, what Derrida understands in another context by, the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present . . . .”<sup>v</sup> This is the only thing a museum can truly understand as its future: that which is to come; the unstable and unidentifiable unfolding that is immanent to the museum’s creation and experience.

If the museum abandons its old concept of the future, if it takes into consideration this unravelling of temporality, then it becomes an occurrence or an event that can never form or prefigure a closure (the death of museums) or a presence (a stable or an identifiable museum). The museum is an institution that can only conceive itself as an unstable and unidentifiable form of exposure (in the sense of both display and revelation). The reason for this is simple: The museum is an institution that positions itself at the juncture of endings and openings. I use here the words “openings” and “endings” in order not to confuse them with origins or closures.

On the one hand, the museum is only concerned with the manner in which art or artifacts are “ended.” As the International Council of Museums made clear, the museum’s remit is to acquire, conserve, research, communicate, and exhibit, for purposes of study, education, and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment. As such (and on a Foucauldian note), its main remit is to bring an end to the errancy of works of art.<sup>vi</sup> Everything ends in the museum and the museum is therefore an institution of endings. This is what made Antoine Quatremère de Quincy and Paul Valéry so famously miserable—museums are mausoleums, repositories of

carcasses of bodies that were once alive, whether attached to a cult or as part of an artistic process.<sup>vii</sup>

On the other hand, the museum is the place where both the artwork and the viewer also depart. It is the place where, for the viewer the imagination is let loose, where the world is placed between parentheses in order to pursue a voyage into another world—  
past, present or future. It is also the place where the artwork acquires the legitimacy that will open it to a myriad of interpretations to come. The museum is the place of critical and curatorial journeys and trajectories.<sup>viii</sup> This is Marcel Proust's well-known argument that the museum *continues* the work of the artwork and that through the encounter between architecture and art, we find ourselves, as viewers, curators, or art historians always on an open road where one never knows where one is going.<sup>ix</sup>

Right there, on this unstable and unidentifiable spacing of temporality, the museum reveals itself as a dialectical institution. Such a claim should not be seen as referring to the traditional sense of the word “dialectical”<sup>x</sup>, in the way used, for example, by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses On the Philosophy of History*.<sup>xi</sup> As is well known, the museum is an institution of the nineteenth century. Unlike the Cabinet of Curiosities, in which objects were assembled randomly, the museum follows a dialectical model that sees its collections either organised chronologically (narrative) or thematically (image), but in all cases through a methodological approach intended to establish either truths or uncertainties. In this way and at its most banal semantic level, the museum is essentially dialectical. Through its series of rigid or flexible frameworks where time and space are isolated, placed in parenthesis, in other words, “aestheticised” by the curator, the museum attempts to make sense of the art or the objects it houses. This is also true of the most avant-garde of museums or public galleries such as, for example, Le Palais de Tokyo in Paris where the encounter with the work of art supersedes issues of authorship or display. Whatever its remit, the museum's aim is always that of making the logos play or work.

Beyond this basic understanding, the word “dialectical” should be understood here, following a tradition first inaugurated by Jean-Luc Nancy, as a word that marks or shapes the difference between openings and endings, a marking that has no proper destination except the sublation<sup>xii</sup> (*aufhebung*) to which it is bound. Nancy's interpretation of the term inaugurates a new reading of Hegel, one that understands

the dialectical, not as an act intended to resolve a contradiction logically, but as an act of receptivity that is also a formative process.<sup>xiii</sup> Instead of a rigid interpretation of the dialectical, Nancy took up the more plastic<sup>xiv</sup> (Hegel's *plastische*) interpretation of the word, one which rescues it from the museum of dead onto-theological monuments. The word "dialectical" conceived through the Hegelian prism of plasticity is crucial in the way it disturbs any systematicity, the possibility of teleology itself. The dialectical not only becomes supple and flexible (plastic arts), but also violent and sudden (plastic explosion). The dialectical intertwines the contradictory forces of the teleological and the contingent<sup>xv</sup> in an act of deferment.

I have used here this revised interpretation of the word "dialectical" not only because it is at the heart of the museum process, but also because it is inseparable from the future. In her book, *L'Avenir de Hegel*, Catherine Malabou takes up this inaugural reading by Nancy and proposes to reject the usual understanding of Hegel's conception of time. For Malabou, Hegel never perceived time as a "now" amidst a series of "nows", a time in which the future is always a "future-now". Malabou sees Hegel's time as an instance of dialectical differentiation that can only determine itself momentarily, that is, "now." In this way, Malabou refuses to reduce Hegel's time to a continuum of instants. Because it "is structured by several 'nows,' it has the ability to differentiate itself from itself."<sup>xvi</sup> Hegel therefore understood time not so much as what appears here or there, but as what constitutes a state of "separatedness" and negation that never marks a repetition or a closure. By proposing this interpretation, Malabou's aim is to reject Heidegger's claim that Hegel only understood time in its vulgar sense that is, as homogeneous and empty. Hegel's time becomes not a point or a time that can only pass or be reiterated or recuperated, but an instantiation of difference. It is, therefore, no longer a time defined by closure (the end of history), but a time necessarily open to the future, to what distances itself from itself, a time that effectively confuses the future and time.

On this unstable and unidentifiable spacing of temporality, the museum turns dialectical (plastic) in the way it brings together, isolates and restores works of art within its walls, not in an attempt to provide a final eschatological<sup>xvii</sup> view of aesthetics, history, or humanity, but in order to perpetuate and/or dislocate the language that animates it. In other words, its role is not to provide a teleological ending to these perceptions, but to constantly present and/or challenge the usual

perception of works of art. In this way, the museum does not represent an origin for the work of art (where it acquired meaning), nor does it represent its death (where the artwork loses its original meaning, the one established by the artist in the studio or in its original location by the temple or church). By being located at the juncture of endings and openings, the museum is necessarily involved in a process that sees the constant deferral of works of art (in or out of the storeroom or gallery space). In this way, the museum presents itself through the double bind that informs and justifies its existence—the constant re-hanging of art or the constant advent of something new. As such, it positions itself in relation to both the foreseen and the unforeseen, the future as a predictable entity and the future as radically other, therefore as an instance that can only be determined in its immediacy. The museum places its treasures right on this process of deferment, this instantiation of space that brings together, *at once*, the teleological and the contingent, that which curators and viewers expect but can never imagine coming.<sup>xviii</sup> This explains why it is never possible to actually pin down or determine what museums are because they are always at the center of their own redefinition, presenting themselves only in their estranged momentariness. The movement of the museum is one that sustains itself through and with the tension it manages to withhold between its own determination and its annihilation into the universal.

This does not mean that the museum is engaged in a process of eternal rebirth. There is no reference here to a temporality of suspense or to a configuration pregnant with tensions.<sup>xix</sup> The museum can no longer be seen as engaged in a temporality of incompleteness, of return, a cyclic temporality that extends across the ages. Rather, both the museum and the artworks are engaged in a plastic process, which has no proper destination except the sublation (*aufhebung*) that animates it. When thinking of an art object in the museum, one is not thinking of it as engaged in a reliable process where past informs the future, but on the unstable and unidentifiable opening that is immanent to the creation and the experience of these artworks. In this way, like there is no center to structure and no origin to the trace, there is no stable ground for the museum dialectical process. This does not mean that works of art or museums can only exist in the hell of absolute and infinite relativism. Their plastic character reveals that the abyss they represent, an abyss where interpretation nosedives at every occasion, can only be a true abyss. It is a

true abyss because it suppresses the absence of abyss that prevents it to drift into itself. In this way, the dialectical process ruling the museum still manages to shape a history, to plasticize itself into the periodization of what has been sublated.

What we are left with, is not the museum as a solid entity, located on a prescribed and self-defining site, declaiming or holding forth the truthfulness of its long-established values. The museum is engaged in a performativity of its own; one which can never establish any form of presence. By being situated at the juncture of endings and openings, by plasticizing itself (moulding / dislocating), the museum is in a permanent “state of conjugation,” always about to be declined, derived, or inflected. For this reason, the museum is always in a state of dispute and contestation. The museum is not a monolithic monster that rules like a despot over various constituencies. The museum is not conservative, but argumentative in the sense that it always seeks to challenge that which enters the plastic process—that which it first rejects as other (site-specificity in the 1960s, for example) and then welcomes as the same (off-site projects today).

If the idea that the museum is dialectical (plastic) in the sense explored by Nancy and Malabou is acceptable, then how to qualify its operative mechanisms or its future? Not unlike for the archive, there is a spectral messianicity at work in the concept of the museum.<sup>xx</sup> The museum, following Derrida’s famous interpretation of the archive in his commentary on Yosef Yerushalmi’s monologue with Freud, is also tied to the very singular experience of the promise.

Until the nineteenth century, the museum promised to be the keeper of a nation’s heritage and to educate the masses. This dual character can be found, for example, in the mission statement of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum in London), which stated both the necessity to expand the collection constantly (enlarge the nation’s heritage) and the imperative to keep a policy of low admission charges and late opening hours for the working classes. As such, the main imperative of the museum was essentially messianic. However, and this is what marks the change from the time of Walter Benjamin, this power is no longer redemptive. The education of the masses no longer rescues them from their miserable existences. Today, the museum offers only experiences and the spectator wants only to be impressed. As such, the museum has lost the redemptive quality that society endowed it with at its creation.

In a time when time has ceased to represent something fixed and stable, something reliable pointing to a single direction, the only thing a museum can do is to maintain this promise in a state of radical indecisiveness. The museum does not promise the perfect world of art or that one-day there will be no more museums. The museum's promise is a promise without determinate content. In order to understand this, we may turn to Derrida's careful rephrasing of Benjamin's messianism.<sup>xxi</sup> Derrida's messianicity without messianism represents the continual commitment to keep open the relation to the other. This promise is crucial as it prevents any presence from being closed around itself. The museum always says to artists and viewers—"yes, come", there is (a) future here. In this way, all action performed by the museum is ruled by the promise, a vacuous promise of an always postponed education. As Ernest Laclau remarked in his review of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*: "We can do away with the teleological and eschatological dimensions, we can even do away with all the actual contents of the historical messianisms, but what we cannot do away with is the 'promise,' because the latter is inscribed in the structure of all experience."<sup>xxii</sup> The museum as the institution safeguarding a heritage for the future is at the center of this non-eschatological and non-redemptive promise.

This messianic dimension of the museum does not therefore depend on any form of messianism. It does not know what art is, but it keeps the promise that the museum is the place where the answer is. And the museum insists that this can happen at any time, to the viewer at any visit, to the artist on the occasion of a commission, an exhibition or a purchase. In this way, the museum places itself as the type of institution that allows its existence to be always defined by the other, its identity always comes from the other, that is, from the future. The way it recuperates artistic practices (for example, feminist or non-western artistic practices in the 1980s and 1990s) shows that the museum constitutes itself on the pretence that its reason to *be* comes exclusively from the outside, from the other, from that which has not yet been created or entered into its remit.

The messianicity of the museum is to allow the other to come. The museum's messianic power is to withhold the certainty that it will always be able to expose itself to the absolute surprise, to the radically new. It always wavers between an "it is coming" and a "is it coming?," between a call and a response. Contrary to common understanding, the museum is not an archival institution in the sense of a repository



of past events. Because it is engaged in the daily business of staging performances and catering for an ever-increasing audience, the museum is always positioning itself within a performative structure, always engaged in its own event. Not unlike the archive, the museum is always tied to the “question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In this way, the museum maintains its promise not between a teleological opening onto the contingent (what Benjamin referred to as revolutionary chance) and a messianic *cessation* of happening (the eschatological or the—perpetual—Last Judgement<sup>xxiv</sup>), but between its plasticity and a messianic *structure* of happening.

Considering this situation, can the museum still hold a sense of the temporal and of its role in respect of the future? Without past and without future, the museum can only remain permanently on edge. It can no longer articulate itself in any other way, but as in a state of restlessness. This does not mean that the museum or the works it houses are always desperate to leave its site, to leave La Gare Saint Lazare and literally go on journeys to Balbec.<sup>xxv</sup> Restless simply means “unable to be still.” The museum is unable to be still *on site*. The fact that it is restless *on site* and not in relation to or in the direction of *other sites* is crucial as the site itself is the emblem of modernity, it defines the museum as the only structure that the western world knows to organise itself, its art, its histories, and ideologies. The Musée d’Orsay in Paris epitomizes this site—it was a site of departures; it is still a site of departures, only now, no one physically ever departs. In this way, and against Proust who understood time as a stream, a modelled or modulated duration, the museum offers thrills and uncertainties, states of excitability and disappointments that never amount to a journey as such. On these busy sites, the museum is what it does. Its act is that of keeping a promise, of keeping “the door” open, and of repeating and/or returning the call, “yes, come”. The aim of this double act is to maintain the tremor that animates it, the deferment or the differentiation that leads the museum to maintain itself as museum. It is through this act, through this restlessness, that the museum plasticizes history and that historiography takes place.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Although not directly related to museums, see my forthcoming book, *Of Times To Come*, (2005). [please give the publisher]

<sup>ii</sup> In the sense of a figured or calculated future.

<sup>iii</sup> As is well known, the museum often presents history in a teleological fashion, that is, as a series of articulated frameworks that advance by themselves and have a single unifying destiny.

<sup>iv</sup> Derrida1996, 68.

<sup>v</sup> Derrida1994, xix.

<sup>vi</sup> Foucault1993, see the opening pages.

<sup>vii</sup> Quatremère de Quincy1989;Valéry1972.

<sup>viii</sup> Adorno1981, 175-177.

<sup>ix</sup> Proust1960, 310-311.

<sup>x</sup> In the sense of the tension or the contradiction between two conflicting or interacting forces, elements or ideas. In Benjamin's case, between a theological and a Marxist conception of history.

<sup>xi</sup> Benjamin1973.

<sup>xii</sup> The Hegelian verb *Aufheben*, usually translated with "to sublimate", is used in the sense of "to raise", "to hold", "to lift up". The term "sublation" refers here to the necessary process by which something is never left to rest.

<sup>xiii</sup> Nancy2001, 2002.

<sup>xiv</sup> The word plastic is derived from the Greek *plassein*, which means "to model" and/or "to mould". As an adjective it is what is malleable and what has the power to mould.

<sup>xv</sup> The word "contingent" is used here in relation to what is dependent on or results from a future as yet unknown.

<sup>xvi</sup> Malabou1996, 29.

<sup>xvii</sup> That is, a view where aesthetics, history and humanity arrive at an end.

<sup>xviii</sup> For the importance of the words "at once", see Derrida1998, 6.

<sup>xix</sup> Déotte1995, 215-232; for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Benjamin and Nietzsche, see Déotte1993.

<sup>xx</sup> The concept of "spectral messianicity" is explored by Derrida1996, 36.

<sup>xxi</sup> Derrida's reading of Benjamin's messianism can be traced back to Khôra1995, *Specters of Marx*1994, Marx and Sons1999 and most recently in *La philosophie au risque de la promesse*2004.

<sup>xxii</sup> Laclau1995, 90.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Derrida1996, 74.

<sup>xxiv</sup> For an analysis of how W. Benjamin's *Last Judgement* can be repeated ad-indefinitum, see Balfour1991, 622-647.

<sup>xxv</sup> Proust1960, 311.