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## **WITNESS WITHOUT PROTECTION**

### **Three Events in Museum History**

At the time when the Museum of African Art was being founded in the late 1970s, the French art historian Jean Clair noticed that the history of the museum is marked by three events.<sup>1</sup> The first is the birth of the modern museum in the late 18th century, the second, the occurrence of anti-museum ideologies at the start of the 20th century, and the third, he reserved for the late 20th century, when museums as we know them, would disappear. And, as we know, Jean Clair was wrong.

Museums have survived by safeguarding their secret well. Just like one egg is more like another egg than what is hatched (whether that be a hen or an ostrich), so one museum resembles another more than the collection it holds. There, it isn't much of a secret after all.

Although, this is a trap one often falls into. We went, for instance, to the Museum of Science and Technology to learn about the evolution of the clock. Or, again, to the Museum of Natural History to learn the history of the cat. We entered – saw, read, heard – and left. What did we learn? We learnt, however we also discovered something unexpected. Clocks and cats are relatives, first cousins in the least, maybe even directly related. Along their *museum lineage*, of course. Museum objects, that serve to bear witness to human destiny and man's attitude towards the world,<sup>2</sup> oftentimes, over the course of time, instead of being witnesses, they transform into signposts in favour of a museum image of the world. And the museum image of the world, as seductive as it is, places at its centre, not man, not world, but the museum and its power to attract.

The museum's mechanism to entice is well known.<sup>3</sup> However, let us go back for a moment to our clocks. The discovery of the mechanical clock (we may have learnt in the Museum of Science and Technology), and its use in "measuring the world," led to an inversion and, accordingly, to a famous metaphor. God, the creator of the world, became a "divine watchmaker." Similarly, at the end of the 18th century – *Clair's first event* – the museum became an ideal instrument for "observing the world." And, yet again, a recognisable trait of the inversion was created. (Inversions are a universal symptom of the

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<sup>1</sup> Žan Kler, „Herostrat ili muzej pod znakom pitanja”, *Kultura*, 41, (1978): 29-43.

<sup>2</sup> Ivo Maroević, *Uvod u muzeologiju*, (Zagreb: Zavod za informacijske studije, 1993), 120-159.

<sup>3</sup> Види: Милан Попадић, „Исходи нове музеологије или како је романописац постао музеолог”, *Култура*, 144 (2014): 128-143.

paradox of modern times.) As the museum became an “image of the world,” so did the museum become an “image of the museum.” The world is endless in its diversity. Still, to understand it (modern man is always looking to understand something), we accept that the world is what we see in the museum. “Have you seen?” – We have. “Well, that is what the world is,” said the museum. And cats?

Cats cannot recognise themselves in mirrors. Because, clearly, in a technological sense, the museum is a mirror. Therefore, cats vehemently pounce on their reflection (*Clair’s second event*). “It is not me,” say the cats, “it is someone else.” And they continue with their attack. The reflected cat does the same as well. The battle continues. Then the first – dare we say *real* – cat, gives up. Was she defeated? Scared? Worn out? No. She noticed (we may have learnt in the Museum of Natural History) that her opponent has no smell. Therefore, she is inconsequential, she poses no threat at all. “This is no life, meow, meow,” says the cat. And leaves.

*Clair’s third event* in museum history, the one that announced the disappearance of museums as we know them for the end of the 20th century, is linked precisely to the discovery of that cat of ours. Life – had to happen to the museum. It was either going to become a part of it (not its reflection), or it was going to disappear. It is not Clair’s fault he was wrong, and that the museum had a turn of fate. Because, life did not happen to the museum. Life, at the end of the 20th century, happened to life.<sup>4</sup> Instead of the museum as we know it, *life* as we knew it disappeared. The crisis of individual and global identities and the interconnectedness of all-encompassing social networks (do not be fooled, it is not people that are connecting but networks), led life into the new millennium. Purr – the museum purred, that old cat – it is a game I know well; it is a game I invented. And, thus it survived.

**Commented [EE1]:** Nisam sigurna da mogu ovde da izvedem onaj “m(j)au, m(j)au”? Pa da li samo da ostane ovako... Ako objašnjavamo igru reči, gubi se na duhu

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of clarity, here are some aspects of life that have “brought [life] to its last legs” at the end of the 20th century: Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960); Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, Aspen, no. 5-6 (1967); Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art,” in *The Death of Art*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Haven Publishing, 1984); Eric Lawrence Gans, *The end of culture*, (University of California Press, 1985); Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, (University of Chicago, 1987); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Leon Rosenstein, “The End of Art Theory”, *Humanitas*, Vol. XV, No. 1, (2002); Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, (John Wiley and Sons, 2010).

### A Journey to the End of Modernity

In the 21st century a museum can be whatever it wants to be. Museum as forum? Yes. Museum as place of participation/partaking? Certainly. Museum as the sound of voices not being heard? Sure. Museum advocating difference? Atlantic-continental museum in an Asian desert? Of course, of course... Museum as space of integration? Definitely. And inclusion? Yes. Museum as...? Yes, yes, of course, there is no need to ask. Only under one condition, however. That it remains a museum.

The mirror that broke at the end of the 20th century, by the start of the next had assembled, slightly cracked, here and there, therefore all the mentioned reflections. This was possible, among other things, because social institutions do not fit life's needs. If we need a museum as forum, where is our parliament? If we want to hear silent voices, where is our empathy? If we need a museum as place of inclusion, where are our social services? If we need the Louvre, why go to Abu Dhabi? If we are to change the world, why change the museum?

There are no certain answers to these questions. On the other hand, what can be stated with certainty is the existence of a special connection between the world and the museum; a connection that is almost two centuries old now: "This ironic heroization of the present, this transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self – Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art."<sup>5</sup>

Jean Clair (ah, there he is again) reminds us that Charles Baudelaire was the first – in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1845 – to use the word modernity in order to celebrate the art and aesthetics of his time. Nevertheless, modernity is not absolute, it is, says Baudelaire, "only half of art," while the other half is "what is eternal and unchangeable."<sup>6</sup> What connects these two halves? Baudelaire will answer this question himself in his essay *The Salon of 1846*: "memory is the great criterium of art; art is the mnemonic of the beautiful."<sup>7</sup> Memory is, Baudelaire believes, a source of creativity; whether painting, poetry or music, the artist, by

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<sup>5</sup> Mišel Fuko, „Šta je prosvetćenost“, *Spisi i razgovori*, (Beograd: Fedon, 2010), 424. [t/n: Michel Foucault. "What is Enlightenment? in Rabinow (P.), éd., *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50. online source: <https://leap.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2017/01/Foucault-What-is-enlightenment.pdf> Accessed: 30.11.2019]

<sup>6</sup> Žan Kler, „Mera modernosti“, *Odgovornost umetnika*, (Beograd: B. Kukić, Čačak: Gradac, 2006), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Šarl Bodler, "Salon 1846", (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1979), 136.

incarnating mnemonic contents to poetic form, addresses the memory of the one consuming art.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to this mnemonic potential, art in the time of modernity played a very specific role. Struggling for self-sufficiency, autonomy, independence in relation to social reality, art became a formative element of that same social reality. “As one of the most exceptional European inventions, *art* is the most efficient ideological instrument for retroactive writing of the history of human society,” claims Donald Preziosi.<sup>9</sup> In other words, art in modern times claimed the value of testimony, and the museum has become its temple. The temple of art, but also the temple of modernity. Thus, before *modern* people, another, perhaps only, yet unfulfilled task was set: to live in the present time; to be modern; to be contemporary; to be *here and now*. “I challenge anyone to show me a piece of beauty that does not contain these two elements,” writes Baudelaire.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the age of modernity is characterised by two poles of appreciation: the appreciation of the objective for the new, for growth, for development, in short – for *progress*, and an appreciation of the aim for preservation, for historization, for collective memory, in short – for the *museum*. Although seemingly opposite, they belong to the same spacetime matrix. For example, progress – development over time – cannot be understood without remembering and historicizing which are the basis of the cognition of time (how do we know something is new if we do not remember the old?). On the other hand, the need to remember and musealise “something” is a consequence of the danger that this “something” might be forgotten and might disappear from the developmental process of modern society. Therefore, the museum and progress can be defined as two poles of modernity that are in a state of mutual production. This relation, albeit obvious, is surely not simple. The dictate of permanent development represents the continuous state of change, therefore the focus of the object of musealisation is volatile; on the other hand, isolating for the purpose of safeguarding is a potential danger to the isolated because it becomes prominent through the act of isolating, and placing something in the spotlight makes it recognizable, therefore potentially threatened and febrile.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. A. Hiddleston, *Baudelaire and the Art of Memory*, (Clarendon Press - Oxford, 1999), viii; Michael Fried, “Painting Memories: On the Containment of the past in Baudelaire and Manet”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Mar., 1984): 510-542.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Preziosi, „Zbirke/Muzeji”, *Kritički termini istorije umetnosti*, prir. R. S. Nelson – R. Šif, (Novi Sad: Svetovi 2004), 488.

<sup>10</sup> Citation according to: D. Carrier, *The Display of Absolutely Contemporary Art in the J. Paul Getty Museum*, in: *Museum Skepticism: A History of Art in Public Galleries*, Durham, NC 2006, 165.

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* Walter Benjamin describes the torn angel of history, creating an almost inevitable *topos* of modernist critique:<sup>11</sup>

“A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, or at least in the same inter-war period context, on the other side of the Atlantic, Alfred Barr was about to form one of the most influential teleological models of modern art – the famous diagram of the development of abstract art – which will find its place on the cover of the catalogue for the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936. What we see in Barr’s diagram, instead of Benjamin’s storm, is – “progress at work.” (If we were to play with formal metaphors, we might say that Barr’s diagram looks like the thunderclouds and lighting that create new and ever new discharges.) The mechanism of this progress is clear, known to art-historical periodisation methods, but Barr’s innovation lies in the readiness to bring the recent past to “history”: “I should explain that by ‘history’ I mean to include what happened yesterday as well as decades or millenniums ago, an inclusion made practicable by the extraordinary acceleration of both critical and documentary processes in recent years.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, history is not something that leaves desolate ruins in its wake, it is a process in which also *we* (contemporaries) partake, something that is rushing towards “its goal” and to which it is, with every fleeting moment – the one millennia ago or a decade ago, or yesterday – closer.

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, the following lines by Benjamin have been cited in three recent studies dealing with the relationship between the past and modernity: Svetlana Bojm, *Budućnost nostalgije*, (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2005); Manfred Osten, *Pokradeno pamćenje*, (Novi Sad: Svetovi, 2005); Hal Foster, “Arhivi moderne umjetnosti”, *Dizajn i zločin (i druge polemike)*, (Zagreb: VBZ, 2006), and in many other older works. Does this description still mean something, or has it become an empty signifier?

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Eseji*, (Beograd: Nolit, 1974), 83. [t/n: Benjamin, W. “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969: 249. Online: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelus\\_Novus#cite\\_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelus_Novus#cite_note-1)]

<sup>13</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr., “Modern Art Makes History, Too”, *College Art Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov., 1941), 3.

By joining different instruments and symbols of modernity, the museum, thus, becomes an autonomous and focal point in promoting contemporaneity and its values. The concept of the museum, thanks to its usual teleological character (which *unmistakably* leads us to *undeniable* modernity as the quintessence of modern life) in the stage of architectural articulation, as a “modern ceremonial monument,” becomes one of the class of objects to which temples, churches and shrines belong.<sup>14</sup> With the movement of visitors (as if in sacred forms) a necessary dialectic is established and the projected narrative is reconstructed. That is how the space of the modern museum is most often founded on connecting several types of spaces: the constructed space of the building, physical space of the ambient and imaginary space of art. The simultaneous experience of different spatial instances facilitates the “architectural walk” (*promenade architecturale*), derived from the concept of spatial flow. The visitor, who is guided by the dialectics of the space, conducts this “walk” within the framework of the self-sufficient *white cube gallery*. In doing so, the visitor is constantly focused on the museum exhibit, as if he does not pay any attention at all as to *where* the work is exhibited and *how* it was reached, because, after all, everything seems, within its autonomous system, to be “in its right place.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Crack as Beginning**

It is only by placing obstacles in the space and hindering movement, that the visitor becomes aware that his route has in many ways already been paved. He is separated from the work, but, paradoxically, it is only then that he takes heed of where the work is placed. Let us use the example from the “archive of modern art” – *The First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, held in New York in 1942. Its “curator” was in body and spirit Marcel Duchamp. In a room filled with the exhibited surrealists works, Duchamp, like our cat, playing with a ball of string, stretched out several hundred meters of twine making the space *at first glance* impenetrable and incomprehensible.

“...Duchamp's installation both negated the traditional gallery's functions (the neutral exhibition of works of art) and concretized the institution's presence as an inevitable readymade frame. Lastly, Duchamp's installation operated as part of an insistent homeless aesthetic that negotiated geopolitical displacement. It combated the movement of Surrealism in exile toward a

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<sup>14</sup> Carol Duncan, Allan Wallach, “Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: Iconographical Analysis”, *Marxist Perspectives* 4, (1978): 28.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (University of California Press, 2000).

compensatory mythologization and search for habitable space. Its labyrinthine frame challenged the homely developments that occurred in Surrealist ideology, aesthetics, and installation techniques in 1942.”<sup>16</sup>

Let us leave surrealism aside and take note that, by making the space “visible,” Duchamp effectively showed that the museum/gallery domain is not a neutral, interest-lacking field, rather, it is a mechanism of managing the movement and gaze of the visitor, thus, ultimately, it is what directly influences perception of the exhibited pieces, but also initiates the possibility of another point of view. Duchamp’s “web” captures also Benjamin’s *angel of history* and Barr’s confident diagram progression. In this Daedalian exposition, then again, utterly Duchampian, it became apparent that both labyrinth (the space of confinement) and Ariadne’s thread (instrument of deliverance) are the work of the same maker. Does this make you nervous?

To be nervous means to be modern, let us say in an attempt to abuse Kierkegaard. Thereby, ever anxious modernity has one an insatiable need – the need to protect. With weapons or contraceptives, archives or museums, it does not matter. And for us to be completely sure that we are protected, we need witnesses to corroborate. Among others, the museum as well – as witness, the godfather of modernity. And, the godfather is not a button, but a god on earth, as the compilation of sayings advises. Maybe this is why during the particular modernist-artistic experiment (as understood by Boris Groys)<sup>17</sup>, that is, during Stalin’s Soviet Union, one saying became exceptionally popular.<sup>18</sup> It goes: *Врѐм как очевидеу*, or *he lies like a witness*. Does it sound familiar?

Is not all of it, good old modernity, good old art and its good old protected witnesses? What does the witness do? Protected as it is, the witness protects one worldview. In other words, that small, humble and, barely, protected witness, is the sovereign ruler of Plato’s cave. It bears witness to the museum image of the world which was the start of this text. It is the watchmaker as eyewitness who measures time. Can the witness step out of time? Can it stop being modern? Can it be left without protection? Does the cancelation of protection also mean liberation? To talk of liberation is superfluous. However, one thing is for certain: the one that lacks protection must look with his/her own eyes, because there is no other choice.

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<sup>16</sup> T. J. Demos, “Duchamp’s Labyrinth: First Papers of Surrealism 1942,” *October* 97, (Summer 2001): 118.

<sup>17</sup> Борис Гројс, *Стул Стаљин*, Београд: Службени гласник, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> One can doubt its “traditionality.” It was written down in the memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich and popularised by Julian Barnes in his novels. Therefore, its dubitability.

Does art accept – this “most revered of modernity’s offspring”<sup>19</sup> – this pointless role, the role of unprotected witness? Finally, the role may be futile, however, it is enticing: to open, with its “unprotected” (it would be naïve to say *innocent*) gaze, the crack in the mirror of the museum world. For, cracks, no matter how small, are essential to us. That's how the light gets in.<sup>20</sup> Let us look for them.

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<sup>19</sup> See: Slobodan Mijušković, *Prva "poslednja 'slika'"*, (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> *There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in*. Leonard Cohen, “Anthem,” *The Future*, 1992.

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