

NO ENDS IN SIGHT

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I would stop celebrating loss, if I could figure out what replaces it.

(Lynne Tillman)

MUSEUM ... We play here daily until the end of the world.

(Marcel Broodthaers)

Museum. ... Gr. *mouseion*, a seat of the Muses ...

Muse. ... Gr. *mousa* ...: pre-Hellenic **montya*, f. Indogermanic root **mon-* (:men- :mn-) to think, remember, etc. One of nine sister-goddesses, the offspring of Zeus and Mnemosyne

(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Project.

Is the museum as we have experienced it coming to an end? Has it outlived its definitions, from classical to postmodern, and, if so, what might become of it? Such a reflection on the possible disappearance of the museum cannot be separated from an examination of its aims and purposes, its ends, and so the question is that of *the ends of the museum*. At stake is nothing less than the memory and the promise of our culture. But "our" culture and "the" museum -- as an institution, an idea, and a practice -- are not, could not be, just one thing. In fact, what compels our attention are the ways in which this institution has developed into an expression of multiple desires and goals, which now, more than ever, seem at odds with one another. Classically, the museum was oriented toward the preservation and conservation of the canon of art history and aesthetics. Modernism gave it the task of embodying the utopian and recuperative power of art, and expanded our notions of what belonged in it. Today, the museum often seeks to become a space where a new community of cultures and histories challenges inherited aesthetic paradigms. These heterogeneous definitions and intentions have not simply succeeded one another, but instead often co-exist in an institution that envisions itself as directed toward the fulfillment of them all. Is this museum possible?

The purpose of this reflection cannot be simply to imagine a museum of the future, nor to recall nostalgically what the museum once was or might have been. What is required is rather a critical genealogy of the museum. This implies not so much a search for its roots, as if history were only a continuous progression from an origin, but a careful theoretical investigation of the museum's uneven developments. What are the epistemological presuppositions of this institution, which is also to say, what are its social, economic, and political stakes? The goal here is neither to describe situations nor to prescribe solutions, but rather to analyze the ways in which the museum can be imagined within, and without, the histories and institutions which have overdetermined it.

(from the proposal for "The End(s) of the Museum," John G. Hanhardt and Thomas Keenan)

Anachronism.

Have museums ever seemed more anachronistic than now ... not simply the houses and guardians of the past, but somehow themselves relics of the past, even of several pasts? Today, there are so many protests against and objections to what these institutions have become that their very existence, their *raison d'être*, is imperiled. To list the critiques, one after another, is to sound a repetitive litany: boring, monotonous, but systematically taking its toll. What's wrong with museums? The objects they collect are threatened with irrelevance in the age of global information and entertainment technologies, from television to computers, and of vast reservoirs of electronically-archived data. Their complicity with and

participation in the maintenance of dramatic inequalities of wealth, their functioning as arbiters of value, and the ease with which they can assist in the legitimation of transnational capital and the financialization of the globe, have rendered them increasingly suspect. The cultural homogeneity, the shared canon of values and ends, and even the nationalism that they often seem to presuppose seems increasingly insupportable, if not unavailable, in an age of proliferating, fragmented and hyphenated identities and crumbling national borders. Museums rarely manage to address anything like a representative public -- and the dream of a common public sphere, or a public in general, to which they nevertheless appeal has been cast in serious doubt, both in its philosophical foundations and by the emergence of counter-public spheres and new public realms, especially those of the media and mass culture. The museum's presupposition of a visitor or a spectator uninflected by sexual difference, the unconscious, or history and its scars, seems naive at best and authoritarian at worst, and certainly untenable in its ontology of consciousness or subjectivity. And the claims to knowledge, to a relative agreement about meanings and a relative neutrality of presentation, and the status and value of the art object itself, have been challenged at their foundations. What are museums for?

These critiques have undeniable force -- indeed, in one language and another, they are at work in the arguments made by the work exhibited in "The End(s) of the Museum." But they are not all that is said or done here. What difference does it make that the critiques take place in this very place, the museum, that they seek to contest? The challenges are far-reaching, but they do not simply proclaim that the museum is finished. The question of what museums might be "for" testifies to a certain fidelity, not to the museum's thought of itself so much as to something that might remain possible within it. To begin with, we can imagine the institution's response to these objections: it will take them to their very end.

Has the museum *ever* seemed so anachronistic? The tense of the question, with its gesture toward the ultimate, might lead to an apocalyptic version of the thought: museums have, finally and decisively, lost touch with their animating principles, surpassed their originating aims, and no longer correspond to their purposes. They have left their reasons behind, transformed themselves into things that have pushed them too far beyond the limits of their originary definitions. No longer classical, nor modern, nor even post-modern, they have reached an end, having arrived somewhere beyond or out of contact with their ends. Museums are exhausted.

This catastrophic (in more senses than one) reasoning can itself be animated by a variety of goals, even contradictory ones. It could find for itself echoes as diverse as a radically phenomenological thought of "the end of philosophy" or a popular post- Cold War notion of "the end of history." We can imagine conservative and radical versions: perhaps museums have lost sight of goals that ought still to be theirs, or perhaps they have wisely put those outdated ends behind them. There are only ghosts of museums now, they say, one sadly and the other with relief. In any case, they share a notion of temporality and teleology which returns them to precisely the origins which the museum claims for itself -- loss and the imminence of the end.

Museums are built on loss and its recollection: there is no museum without the threat of erasure or incompleteness, no museum not shadowed by the imagination of the impending destruction of what it therefore seeks to stabilize and maintain. Or, to be more exact, we can say that museum finds in loss its most powerful *alibi*. Elsewhere, something is said to be nearing its end, threatened with extinction, and demands memory and protection. There is inevitably something of the cemetery and the epitaph where the museum is concerned -- even in the most avant-garde or *au courant* of contemporary museums. The end is the goal, or rather, the postponement of the end -- at the level of representation or presentation -- but this deferral depends on the imminence of the disaster. The museum wants to be a salvational and sheltering institution, a machine for preservation and transmission, an archive of what is lost or at risk of disappearing and a mechanism for re-animating it, a platform that allows it once again to communicate with the present. Loss and the fear of destruction, especially after the exposure of the fragility of a collective identity, is a terrible stimulus to preservation and to a hygienic ordering of the patrimony and its legatees -- nothing teaches us this as well as the violence that constantly accompanies responses to this fear, today in Bosnia, Rwanda, or the corridors of Western state power. Museums defend traditions, they remember and represent, gather together in collections and exhibitions what needs to be rescued or exposed -- whether as tradition or avant-garde, center or margin, orthodoxy or heterodoxy -- because it is endangered, in its physical existence or its significance. Museums shelter not so much objects as meanings, and their work is that of articulating, linking and arranging them in a network of significance.

The museum, seat of the muses, marks a space and time for memory, a memory pointed straight into the future. That is why they are so often sites of struggle: founded or undermined, raised or shelled, funded or abandoned. Museums come down to threat and loss, and the memory that finds its origin in this experience of erasure.

At least that's what they say, and often what they do. According to this "finalist" scenario, one option remains. If the museum is itself threatened, if it now runs the risk of anachronism (and this must not be taken for granted), then the moment has arrived for nothing less than a museum for museums, a site to mark and remember the work that museums have done, to record their origins and their purposes, chart their successes and failures, and gather together the traces of their existence -- not merely to celebrate or to mourn, we hear the institution intone, but to evaluate them critically. Now, goes this story, museums themselves require protection and preservation, shelter from their own irrelevance or anachronism. Somehow they demand to be recalled in their turn, having outlived themselves, surviving now only as ghostly reminders of some increasingly forgotten will to remember. And nothing does this work of recollection better than the museum.

The dialectical inversion is predictable and powerful, the elegant maneuver of an institution founded on absence and dedicated to its negation and recovery in turn. At the end of the museum, a last museum. The speculative wager would put the entire institution at stake, risk the entire history and meaning of the museum as a project, in order to recuperate just that unity, that determinate totality of a purpose which only finally comes to recognize itself in the face of its annihilation. When all is lost, rescue the loss and with it the all. Nothing would be better suited to perform this labor of negation, which is to say, the negation of the negation, than the critical work that seeks to put the museum to its end. To the extent that it returns the museum to its origins in loss, it allows the institution the glance of self-recognition and the symmetry of recuperation: the museum is over, long live the museum. At the end, its own end, the museum recognizes and reconstitutes itself as the very institution of that loss.

Speculative dialectic, or *mise-en-abyme*? The wager and the pathos of disaster are the desperate strategies of an institution which has run out of ways to think about itself, that returns to its origins -- that is, to the origin -- just when they have the least to offer. There are other ways to interpret the contemporary crisis of the museum, other strategies for thinking about the putative threats to the institution, and new ways to evade the claims of the origin and the hegemony of the end (in every sense). "The End(s) of the Museum" points in many of these other directions, aiming less to stage the crisis and make it available for specular recuperation than to inscribe, within the institution "itself," the ways in which it might differ from itself, expose it to its (own?) divergence from its ends.

Loss (without end)

Just how authoritative is the origin? If the museum appears to be finished -- captured by some reified ideal of collection and preservation, or mourning the passage of an abandoned dream of utopia and critique, or repossessed by a multiculturalism that refuses to challenge the concept of culture at its foundation, or torn between the confusion of all of these goals -- this verdict can only be pronounced if we continue to subscribe to the claims it makes for its origins. Why limit the institution to its aims or its alibis, and to the convergence of these aims in an ideal of shelter? If the museum has survived, managed indeed to communicate in spite of these threats, perhaps it owes its future to this very deviation (loss, yes, but now in affirmative sense), to the inevitability of the *dérive* that has led the institution away from its (imagination of its) ordinary desire. Not a loss of the origin but a loss at the origin, a loss that does not befall the origin (of the museum, of the objects that it shelters and allows to speak, of the public and the subject) but rather marks it from the start as destined to an open future, to a divided identity and an errant path.

In the end, as at the beginning, there should be deferral. Whether or not something is determinate "in the last instance," the lonely hour of the last instance never comes, Althusser said ... which, while it releases some of the humanitarian pathos, cannot come simply as a relief, since this "never" has not seemed in the least to frustrate the technicians and theorists of so many final solutions in this barbaric century. Offspring of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the museum remembers these catastrophes, these rises and falls, it mourns and marks them -- violence with memory. If it has always been driven by this goal, this fear of the end that somehow also needs its imminence to keep going, then there has also always been another

museum, other museums, at work within the dominant interpretation. The museum is incomplete, endless: its ends -- the end itself -- have never succeeded in governing it. No end of the museum, no apocalypse (not now, as Derrida so unforgettably put it), and certainly no museum for museums. Not because the museum is alive and well, a vital institution for the next millennium -- absolutely not. And not because the museum is dead and gone, on its way out, lost, or at a loss, either. But rather because the entire teleology that animates this scenario, the thought of presence and its erosion and its maintenance (in time, language, representation), is governed by the very metaphysics that has itself rendered the museum questionable. If the museum sees itself as imperiled, threatened by forces external to it (media, mass culture, virtual reality) or exhausted internally by a certain (let's risk the word) decomposition, then the apocalyptic tone is produced out of the thought to which it attributes its animation in the first place -- the thought that the presence of the originating intention saturates the institution, gives it its *raison d'être* and defines its existence ... in a word, the thought of "the first place" itself -- and which makes possible an institution organized around the positing and the recovery of loss. So many possible futures for the museum emerge in the deconstruction of this origin, in its exposure to its own confusion and incompleteness -- this time thought not as weakness and impending doom but as difference and affirmation. History, like the museum, remains open.

For a museum without end, without ends in sight. Does this imply an institution cut adrift from its founding purposes, released from its goals and ends, abandoned to aimless uncertainty, but for the certainty of catastrophe? Or does it on the contrary suggest a museum unbound, voracious in acquisitions and appropriation, omnivorous in its hunting and gathering, let loose to pursue those ends with abandon, to shelter everything and anything imaginable?

Neither. The museum without ends (in sight) can only be open-ended, incomplete, not simply lacking in but resistant to totality. It hesitates about utopia, especially the yawning utopias of utter endlessness and irrestriction, sheer de-limitation and libertinage. These are the fantasies of a subject or agent freed into its long-awaited sovereignty, unshackled by norm or law, or of the empire that knows borders, as Marx said somewhere, only as more territories for conquest. And the museum open enough to raise questions about these borders and these ends, especially about its own rich reimagining of its origins in collecting and sheltering and the protection against loss, must first of all raise questions about that rampaging subject itself, the self in its auto-infinite will to power. The absence of purposes is merely an incitement for this subject, a chance for the decisive transgression, and not a critical gesture at all. Just as the proclamation of *the end*, once and for all, merely stabilizes for a subject its present and the security of its position in that present. The museum puts precisely this thought of subjectivity -- and with it that very tradition of shelter, foundation, loss, and presence -- into crisis.

For a museum of crisis, not another monument to crisis, not another effort to heal or reconcile the wounds and losses of history, to bring a shattered or eviscerated subject and public back together again, to overcome and transcend the divisions of our culture which is not one. The aim of reconciliation is indistinguishable from the dream of loss and its recovery, of a solution that will finally put an end to the danger. Neither art nor the museum will clear up the distortions, quiet the questions, provide critical distance and a harmonious reunion. Conflict and opacity live at the heart of the museum "itself," just as they structure society and culture and politics as impossible totalities, necessarily divorced from origins or conclusions.

Polyunsaturates.

Thank goodness (or something), there is no end-ism here, no concerted movement that seeks to put an end to the museum forever, that aims out of deranged fidelity to some imagined origin to turn the museum onto itself in a final celebration of its own loss. To the extent that the glimmerings of such a discourse are audible today, they come from the institution itself, the one that seems all too eager to proclaim its own anachronism, to trumpet its threatened character and invoke its founding principles as the very shoals on which it founders. The museum, erased, like a figure drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea? Derrida -- now more than a quarter century ago in "Les fins de l'homme" (from which this project borrows its name) -- alerted us to the danger of this rhetoric of the end as the exemplary ruse of a humanism at its limits. The museum that loudly proclaims its own devastation, from end to end, rests comfortably at the core of this tradition.

"The End(s) of the Museum" offers, in bits and pieces, another story, another set of stories. Necessarily incomplete and hybrid, disjointed and often contradictory, at many levels, the exhibition -- or rather, the *exposition*, of the museum to the museum, without symmetry or speculation, without end, but rather in the manner of the detotalizing rhetorical figure of the *mise-en-abyme* -- insists on an affirmation of conflict and crisis without conciliation or reconciliation, without finality or recovery of or at the end. Like the boy on the cocoa tin holding a cocoa tin, with a boy on it holding in his turn a cocoa tin with a boy on it ..., and so on, this abyssal figure affirms, at once unreadably and insistently, that no end is in sight. The figure, though, is not that of the endlessness of the infinite regress or the specular play of mirrors, but an affirmative refusal of this comforting totality. We lose the stability of our point of reference, seeking to read the *mise-en-abyme*, but without managing to read it or to evade the ineluctable fact that, like it or not, it will have read us and "our" predicament. There is nothing new, in fact, about this gesture. The structure of detotalization or irrecoverable crisis, of the public and the subject (in another vocabulary, the visitor) split from itself, makes the institution necessary. If we could take the totality -- the loss and its recovery for instance, or the continuous derivation from the origin, or the preservation of the object and its meanings for the future -- for granted, we would have no need of museums. What museums have tended to treat simply as loss, the loss of something formerly present, is itself an interpretation of another separation, a movement of irreconcilable difference without end. Loss or end is the name (earlier we called it an *alibi*, which marks the gesture toward some primordial "elsewhere") given to a divergence or a discord in view of its eventual solution, one that projects back onto a past moment of imaginary unity the suppression of differences it seeks to achieve in the future. But the transparency of this resolution remains a ruse. The museum depends on the 'originary' divergence, which makes possible -- and problematic -- all that it does: memory, community, and even critique. But it cannot guarantee them, and it cannot erase the opacity that makes them necessary. We speak precisely because we can never be sure of being understood. We act together in public, we enter the polis and claim our rights, because our common humanity is uncertain and always subject to contest. The dissonance, the distortion, the dissensus, dissemination and ambivalence that structure our speaking and acting make the museum -- no matter what its aspirations, goals, or would-be origins -- an institution of crisis. This puts it at risk, surely (it does not *succeed* in institutionalizing the irreconcilable), but this risk is its condition.

The questions about the ends of the museum depend on this polyunsaturated condition, and that is why they cannot and must not be reduced to a proclamation of the end. The crisis of the museum is glaringly evident, but the work here calls for different interpretations of that crisis. It demands new readings of the critical categories with which we began: object and media, subject and public, memory and history. The museum is no more at its end than the public sphere is lost, which is to say, the public sphere is always already disappearing -- that is its definition in the democratic tradition, since its boundaries and possibilities are always subject to precisely the renegotiation it seeks to render possible -- by virtue of its publicity. "The dissolution of the markers of certainty," with which Lefort has defined the emergence of the public and its rights, the democratic invention, today affects the museum as its possibility and its risk. Likewise, the memory at work in the museum must break with its recollective, interiorizing, monumentalizing tradition and expose it to the unreachable anteriority of the past and to the traumatic history that affronts understanding. No analytic reduction of the museum to its origins -- whether in the good conscience of 'our heritage' or the guilty fact of 'the economy,' whether in the sanctity of the aesthetic or the pleasure of the touristic -- suffices to come to terms with its radically open-ended structure. Related to the past, but to a past that it can never master, the museum rises over a gap and a divergence that tolerate no suture. "There are no 'primary structures,'" said Broodthaers in a somewhat different context, but, as always, he was writing about the museum: devoted to the primary, it remains all superstructure, utterly mediated, unsaturated by origins, open to the fragility and the irreducibility of the loss it, confusedly, seeks to reverse. "We play here daily until the end of the world," or, as he put it later, "all day long, until the end of time."

Things fall apart, said Chinua Achebe. Indonesia's Pramoedya wrote simply of "things vanished." This terrible century, now coming to an end, indelibly marked with a Holocaust and with so many other holocausts, calls out for memory, but not simply for the remembrance content to commemorate. The confidence that the disaster might be avoided in the future by the courageous act of recollection seems increasingly misplaced. What would it be to remember what is not simply lost but altogether vanished? Can we imagine a museum that would not content itself with the pathos of this memory destined to fail, a museum that wanted to interrupt the course of history and its catastrophes rather than simply recall them? Nothing replaces the loss -- far from marking the end of the museum, this is why there are

museums, with impossible responsibilities, and without end.