ON THE OBJECT OF THE MUSEUM AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The work presented in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

NAOMI STEAD
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ABSTRACT

In the architecture of some recent social history museums can be seen a series of new and significant developments in the museum institution more generally. This thesis examines these developments with reference to two specific works of museum architecture: the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

Both buildings are simultaneously functional museum spaces, and artworks of great affective power. Both are centred upon absence, loss, and the ineffable pastness of the past as such, and both rely on a certain level of interactivity between art and beholder to enact their commemorative function. Perhaps most significantly, each of these works of museum architecture can be understood as specifically allegorical. This is true in the sense that they invite interpretation, they are politically engaged, site specific, and explicitly ‘constructed’. They are also pledged, hopelessly, to the material world. All this is to say that they have a double existence – they are both specific and universal, engaged and autonomous, container and contained. They are objects, but objects mortified and hollowed. This is an architecture always already conceptually ‘ruined’, and a museum institution that addresses its mausoleum character by incorporating it equally as form and as content.

The thesis argues that the very ambiguity of architecture, its status as both art and artefact, with objecthood and also a certain autonomy, can serve to anchor the negative but necessary alienation of the museum institution from empirical reality. Further, it argues that it is this very deathliness from which the museum’s principal social utility derives. The museums examined here demonstrate that it is still viable to have an institution that contains and requires objects – albeit artworks as well as artefacts. The appearance of art in and as the museum thus brings the larger argument full circle: art can represent the unrepresentable, equally as it acts as a bulwark against the disappearance of objects, of all categories, from museums altogether. And if the art of museum architecture provides it with the capacity for critique, the artefactuality of this same architecture, and the objects contained within, provides it with both motivation and reward for this critical role.
Repaired shrapnel damage to the stonework of Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s Altes Museum, Berlin
The significance of this dissertation’s title stems from the multiple meaning of its three key terms – object, museum, and architecture – which form a matrix, their implications shifting in relation to one another. The word ‘object’ can be placed in the real material realm of the *objectival*, and the abstract intentionality of the *objective*. It also opens the question of *objectivity*, a stance or position of supposedly unbiased and absolute judgement, and thus is framed in opposition to subjectivity, the relational and relative position of the individual subject. More obscurely, to *object* is to protest, to make an *objection*, and the thesis is also concerned with precisely those roles that are resisted or disavowed by the museum institution. The ‘object of the museum’ thus refers simultaneously to the purpose of the museum, to its objectival contents, to its particular discursive stance, and to those elements of itself and the world that it refuses.

The meaning of ‘museum’ is also multiple. It refers to the museum as a physical entity – a public institution – and the museum as an intellectual construct, an ordering system, one of the principal means by which humankind re-orders and re-presents the world. In this sense the ‘museum’ is also an apparatus, a technical mechanism for the display and dissemination of knowledge. Importantly, too, the ‘museum’ is a specific building type, an architectural genre. The words ‘museum architecture’ can thus be read as a tautology, or equally as a compound – taking account of the history and specificity of *museum* architecture within the field of *architecture* more broadly. The last of the three terms, ‘architecture’ refers to the art and process of designing and fabricating buildings, as well as to those buildings themselves. It also has a metaphorical sense, referring to the order and logic of any construction, whether conceptual or material.
In light of all this, it is possible to speak of the architecture of the museum object, and by that to refer to the way in which meaning and value is structured, located and lodged in objects in museums. Equally it is possible to speak of the object of museum architecture, and thence to mean both the purpose of museum architecture, and what might be called architecture’s object character. This preface seeks to unfurl some of the broad implications of the object, in/and/of the museum, in/and/of its architecture. Working from the specific to the general it will begin, as it were, at the end – with architecture.

ON THE OBJECT OF THE MUSEUM AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

Perhaps it is simply a coincidence that the titles of two of the most significant works of museum theory and criticism of the late modern period rest upon an architectural metaphor. Perhaps it is also a coincidence that both of these titles, Andre Malraux’s The Museum Without Walls and Douglas Crimp’s On the Museum’s Ruins, refer to the breaching of the architectural envelope, the breaking down of the museum's integrity as a bounded, discrete, or autonomous realm.¹ But then again, perhaps this is no coincidence at all. Indeed, if there was to be any over-riding metaphor that could encapsulate the state of the museum institution in the modern period, it is hard to see any that would serve better than the architectural. And if there were to be a theme that most characterised the work of museum critics through the same period, it would surely be the attempt to break through the boundaries that isolate the museum from life praxis, to ‘ruin’ it by breaching its ‘walls’. The attempt to dismantle the museum’s walls, whether literally or figuratively, is the sign of a desire to inhere the museum within the world, to render its edges diaphanous and permeable, even non-existent, and thus open to the free flow of light, space, time, people, objects, and commerce. These walls thus emblematised the isolation, or at least the separation of the institution from everyday, empirical reality; they keep things out as surely as they keep things in. But walls are double sided. The external

¹ In fact Malraux’s book was released under this title only in its English translation – the original French title was Le musée imaginaire. But this in fact underscores my point, rather than undermining it. If we can assume some equivalence between an ‘imaginary museum’ and a ‘museum without walls’ then surely it also follows that a museum is free to be more ‘imaginary’ if it is not fettered by the earthly constraints of walls, and indeed of architecture at all.
faces of the museum’s walls are both its formal expression and its physical interface with the external world. The inner faces of the museum’s walls are an extension of its display function – in art museums it is literally the interior walls on which paintings are hung. Architecture objectifies and gives form to the museum, just as it separates and protects it from the world. Its walls are the mediator that simultaneously connects and isolates the museum from the life praxis, controlling both inward and outward interaction.

In light of all this, the critical project of breaking down the museum’s walls, which has reoccurred throughout the institution’s history, raises several important questions. Would a museum without walls be a museum at all? And might there be some value, even if negatory, in the alienation of the museum from the life in the present? Not only is a museum simultaneously a building and an institution, both an apparatus and an object of display, but it is also, in the full sense, a construction of the world. It may have been subject to the same processes of deconstruction as every other edifice of modernism, its foundations may have been shaken by postmodern critique, but the ‘museum boom’ of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are proof enough that both the institution, and its architectural metaphor, still stand. And thus it seems that the discourse of architecture, in both its political and poetical modes, provides a unique critical aperture through which to approach the changing role, meaning, and social utility of the museum more generally.

One of the contentions of this dissertation is that many of the issues and questions that cluster around the museum object – as thing – and the museum’s objects – its aims and purposes – also reoccur at the level of museum architecture. This is because museum architecture is, uniquely, both a museum object and the museum object; it is both form and contents, container and contained. This is particularly true of purpose-built museum architecture. The fact that a purpose-built museum has quite a different significance from a museum housed in an historic, or even simply an extant building, has not often been noted in the current explosion of museum literature. But that is one of the principal assumptions here, along with the idea that this unique significance arises from the practice and discourse of architecture itself. A purpose-built museum has the potential to re-frame, re-state, and re-present the museological and historiographic concerns of the moment
through the secondary language of architecture. More than this, museum architecture that critically engages with such issues, as in the two case study museums to be examined in this dissertation, serves to open a series of fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of the museum, the museum object, and museum experience, as well as museum architecture itself.

In pursuing the question of how the museum’s objectives might be furthered or achieved by its architecture, it soon becomes clear that museum architecture can support, imply, or even demand a particular mode of museum display. Increasingly, museum architects are also acting as de-facto exhibition designers. It is no longer possible, if indeed it ever was, to draw a clear distinction between architecture and exhibition, just as ‘exhibitionist’ museum architecture is now commonplace. The ideology and apparatus of museum display is increasingly intertwined with its architectural frame – the marriage between museum and architecture has never been so close, and the frame is increasingly also the framed. So while the relationship could be seen, on one level, as one of form and content, the division is no longer that simple. It needs hardly be said that architectural form has a content of its own, and that the ‘content’ of a museum exercises certain ‘formal’ ideas as well.

It might be said, then, that museum architecture can objectify the museum’s broader aims, ideologies, and modes of display. But importantly, too, architecture acts upon the beholder – the museum subject. The programming and choreography of phenomenal experience is increasingly a part of the museum’s overall strategy – plotting not only a particular path through museum space, but also a particular experience and affect. It could be argued that it is architecture’s ability to act at the level of affect that holds together all of the diverse objects, subjects, and narratives that are gathered within the museum’s walls.

Much of this thesis will be engaged with the mutual entanglements of architectural form and museological content, the possible inferences of one within the other, and the way in which contemporary developments in the theory, practice, and objectives of the museum institution have come to be reflected in museum architecture. But the practice of architecture also has an interest in its own disciplinary specificities, and its advancement as an art, quite independent of its fulfilment of a specific function. Conversely, the building type known as ‘museum’ is
a specific architectural genre, with a history and typology of its own. All this is to say that the relationships between museum, architecture, and museum architecture are much more reciprocal and revealing than a simple functional subservience.

Clearly one of the objects of museum architecture is to efficiently and effectively fulfil the specific programmatic needs of the contemporary museum; this goes without saying. But there is more to it than that: museum architecture also has a strong communicative and representational aspect, and it can have a role in expressing and embodying certain museological beliefs and strategies. Perhaps most importantly, the object of museum architecture seems increasingly to be self-reflexivity – the museum building is called upon to foreground its own artifice and constructedness, its dual existence as also part of the museum’s contents. This opens the question of what category of object it might be, whether artwork or artefact. At the level of architecture, this question gains another layer of complexity: when is a building a work of architecture, and when is a work of architecture a work of art?

While architecture may be seen to encompass the design, fabrication, and occupation of buildings, it does not necessarily follow that its art is located in built form. There is a tension between architecture’s place as a tangible thing in the world, its ordering and choreographing of the experience of a beholder, and its existence as an abstract idea. It is unclear whether architecture is located in products or practices. On the one hand, buildings might be seen as a kind of by-product or husk of architecture, which is actually located outside of the object. On the other hand, a more conventional art historical treatment would have it that built form is the medium, and that this results in a physical work of architecture just like the act of sculpting results in a physical sculpture. Debates about architecture as art are very often also, directly or indirectly, debates about its object character. Such questions go to the heart of how art is defined, and how and where architecture is an art.

Curiously enough, to say that a building is an ‘object’ can, in architectural parlance, be something of an insult. It implies that the building does not respond or fit in adequately to its context, and that it has been designed to stand out, to draw attention to itself as a work of architecture. Interestingly, this is virtually the same pejorative as saying that a building is a monument, which also implies that it is self-
aggrandising, and places too much emphasis on formal concerns over the functions and activities that it contains. This is made doubly significant by the fact that architectural monuments are seen to be released, at least partially, from the necessity for a function. Function is the single factor that truly complexifies the relationship between architecture and the other arts. Architecture is used by people in the quotidian pursuit of their everyday lives. Architecture thus struggles with its double-edged character - having an intimate connection with the life-world, but thereby becoming ubiquitous, sinking below the threshold of notice, being apprehended only in a state of distraction. Architecture thus has an inherent object character, an inescapable groundedness as a thing in the world, which complicates its parallel existence as an art.

So there are a whole series of questions raised by the clause ‘on the object of the museum and its architecture’. How, for instance, is the museum’s purpose furthered or enacted by its architecture? What is the purpose of museum architecture, and what is the object character of architecture? These are just some of the most fundamental questions at hand, and the dissertation will explore their implications at length. But at this early stage, it is also possible to propose a series of contentions. These are: that the broader museum’s purpose – its object – can be furthered and enacted by purpose-built architecture, in ways that are interesting, significant, and revealing. That museum architecture has its own objects, that is to say disciplinary specificities and purposes of its own, in furthering its particular mode of art and in existing simultaneously as the form, and part of the contents, of the museum. And finally, that questions of the object character of architecture are also central to its definition and designation as a form of art. This brings us, then, to the object of the museum.

ON THE OBJECT OF THE MUSEUM
As previously noted, the object in the title can be read in the sense of aim, purpose, or intention. In this way, the dissertation is also concerned with the general objectives that the museum sets out to achieve. More tangentially, it is also concerned with the object of the museum in relation to objects, that is, the ways in which objects as the contents of the museum serve to further its purpose.
In both of these broad senses, the dissertation is concerned with the ways in which the role and utility of the museum has changed and developed throughout its history, leading to its present, pivotal place in contemporary culture. More than this, the thesis is concerned with how the museum has conceived of its own role, purpose and value, and how this has aligned (or not) with the perceptions and expectations of the populace, and of other institutions of culture. These internal and external conceptions, of what the objectives of the museum should be, have sometimes been out of synch. This disjunction has been most pronounced at those periods in history where the museum has been undergoing redefinition and change, and these are in many ways the most revealing moments to examine. It will be argued here that the museum is undergoing just such a transitional moment at present.

The dissertation is also concerned with examining, and to some extent re-valuing, some of those branches of the museum's past utility and value which have atrophied and been cast aside, or those which have, for various reasons, been repudiated. Throughout its history, the museum has embodied many deeply held ideas about nature, culture, knowledge, civilisation, and progress. In examining the history of such ideas, it becomes clear that there is no direct or clear periodisation, but that the changing nature of museums is a shifting matrix rather than a linear chronology. If the museum's various functions, both past and present, can be loosely gathered under the headings of research, education, and entertainment, then it is possible to note a historical pattern of changing emphasis. If research is regarded as the scholarly pursuit of knowledge within and about an archive or collection, education as the dissemination of knowledge to a wider populace, and entertainment is seen as independent of learning or edification, then the hierarchy within these has shifted differentially over time.

On a more general level, it is possible to identify an increasing rationalisation of the museum's object. While museums may once have aspired to a relatively vague concept of edification, the belief that merely coming into contact with authentic art and artefacts would have a 'bettering' effect, their objects are now quite specific. Indeed, whether because of the effects of so-called 'economic rationalism', accountability to public funding bodies, or some other thing, museums are increasingly under pressure to justify themselves in productive terms. The
desire to act upon, entertain, and educate the populace, to express and affirm national identity, to attract tourists, and even to be a tool for urban renewal – all of these could conceivably be included within the objects of the contemporary museum. Even the most apparently extravagant new museum constructions can be rationalised in terms of their value as iconic 'brands' and marketing devices, and on another level collections have come to be seen as 'assets' and the museum's activities as 'product'. Of course, there may be nothing wrong with such rationalisation, but the trend must be noted for what it reveals about the changing objects of the museum, as well as the changing role of museum architecture in achieving these objects.

Only the research function of museums actually requires an archive. The didactic function can employ objects but does not specifically require them, and the entertainment function increasingly seems better served by interactive digital media and computer interfaces than by genuine artefacts. Both entertainment and educative functions can, and increasingly do, rely on media more than objects. The implications of this shift for the museum's role as an archive, a repository for objects, are significant. And this brings me to the final term in the triad around which the dissertation's title is constructed – the object.

ON THE OBJECT

Truth, as authorised by the museum, has historically been largely verified through the presentation and display of things: ‘evidence’ in the form of ‘authentic’ objects. The museum is unique precisely through this object-based representation of the world and its history; it is the presence of objects that distinguishes museums from other forms of classificatory system or historical narrative. Of course, the question raised by critical museology is whether such truths are actually constructed in the museum, or whether they already exist and are merely proven by the institution. But in either case, objects play a crucial role as material evidence supporting a particular version of the world and events in it, and this material and objectival mode of presentation is unique to museums.

It would once have been commonplace to assert that the archive function, of an ordered and curated collection of actual things, was central to the constitution
and definition of museums. But in recent years this assumption has been so systematically challenged and undermined as to now seem precarious. It is safe to assert that the status of the museum object, and of the museum as an archive of objects, is under revision. Developments in digital technology no doubt play a significant role, but to a large extent this present crisis of the museum object is also ideological. It has resulted from a critique of long-held notions of objective truth – both in the sense of absolute truth, and in the sense of truth resident in the authentic object – which underpinned the museum in its early modern incarnations. But the contention will be made here that, important as such critiques are, the expulsion of objects from museums on the grounds of such ideological critique would be overly hasty. The abandonment of objects would entail the loss, not only of the museum’s unique role in finding and presenting order and narrative through material culture, but also of its principal pleasure – which lies in the apprehension of the real. This, then, is one of the central problems of the contemporary museum.

There are also some more fundamental questions to be posed here, even if their answers lie outside the scope of this study. What, for instance, is an object? What kinds of objects do museums contain? What are the differences between these types of object? More specifically, how do objects have meaning in museums – do they have meaning in themselves, or is their meaning entirely ascribed by their context, their situation, and the ideas that they are called upon to represent? Given their philosophical nature, it would be foolish to attempt any simple answer to these questions, but it is worthwhile to restate them here, in the terms of this dissertation.

Museums, of all kinds, could be said to contain three primary types of evidential material thing or, generically, object. These might be categorised as specimens, artefacts, and artworks, and I use each of these terms in a specific sense. A specimen would be any object, most commonly from the realm of natural history, which has neither been made, used, nor touched by human hand. The category of artefact, on the other hand, would encompass all objects inscribed, whether visibly or not, with the traces of human work. An artefact would be

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2 I use the word ‘primary’ to exclude what might be called ‘secondary’ museum contents – including props.
evidence of human history, society, and culture. Artworks, those things (not necessarily physical objects but nevertheless ‘objects’ of thought) that are intended and acknowledged as art, would be the final category. This dissertation will rarely be concerned with specimens, more so with artefacts, and most of all with artworks. It will particularly address the interface between artworks and artefacts – how they can be distinguished, whether there is any overlap or commonality between them, and what the implications of this are for museums. This will extend in turn to the distinctions between different genres of museum, which are usually understood to both dictate and be derived from the particular category of their object contents.

The thesis will also examine certain revealing shifts and anomalies in this classification of museum type through object type. In the history of museums it is a curious fact that art which was itself old could be displayed in the history museum, whereas art that took historical events as its subject could equally be displayed in the art museum, in isolation both from the material evidence of the events it depicted, and other monuments or memorials to those events. Likewise, the Eurocentric bias of the early modern museum was such that the art of ‘primitive’ or ‘exotic’ peoples was displayed as part of an anthropological narrative, or even in the context of natural history. Ancient art, displaced from the ‘centre’ in time rather than space, was similarly perceived as anthropological evidence. In both of these cases art was regarded as a document of culture, an artefact best understood in light of the time, place, and conditions of its production. This stood in opposition to another significant conception of art as rightly transcending all such particularities. The question of how a work can oscillate between the register of anthropology and art – between an existence as an artefact and as an artwork – according to the conditions of its framing and definition, remains both fascinating and revealing.

It is necessary to use the designation art work here (rather than art object) to acknowledge a certain necessary ambiguity. On its most obvious level this acknowledges that not all artworks are material objects; this is self-evident. But more than simply being inclusive of all genres of art, and collapsing the distinction between objectival and performative modes of art production, the designation ‘artwork’ points to another, deeper significance. In what might be called the objectival arts – that is painting, sculpture, and architecture – there is a line of
argument that says that the art work is somehow not an object. This is because it subordinates its existence as an object to its transcendence as an artwork, and does not project presence, duration, and existence in the world. Another way of putting this might be that certain art objects are seen to be autonomous, not only of the political and social conditions of their own production, but also of being objects at all.

It could be said that an artwork will always also be an artefact in the neutral sense of being an object of culture, but that in the modern period this ‘objecthood’ is very often subordinated in favour of the immaterial, representational idea. To examine an artwork in the context of the physical, social, political and cultural circumstances that gave rise to it is to reconstitute it as another category of anthropological artefact; this much is clear. But such a conception runs directly counter to the idea of art as a transcendent realm, rising above the specific and contingent in pursuit of timelessness and universality; counter, that is, to the idea of art as autonomous. Such a conception of art is uniquely enshrined in the art museum – the techniques and modes of display, the apparent ‘neutrality’ of the gallery space, the arrangement of works in art historical groupings, the taxonomic categories under which each work is listed, all of these contribute to a reading of art as disinterested, rightly isolated from the world in a separate realm with its own immutable laws.

If, following this logic, an artwork can be taken to be in some way not an object, then the distinction between anthropological, evidential, decipherable artefacts, and aesthetic, atemporal, self-contained and self-explanatory artworks is one between things which have a clearly defined objecthood and things which do not. This is of course arguable, and has been debated extensively in the discourse of art theory. The dematerialisation of the art object, and the rise of multi-media and intermediary works, can all be seen to demonstrate the potential fate of the museum object in general. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine that, long after artefacts and specimens in museums were all replaced with simulations and representations, artworks would continue to be enshrined in art museums, with ideas of authenticity, and truth embodied in the object, left intact. Artworks, as the ‘highest’ and most abstract level of museum contents, can thus be seen as a kind
of limit condition, a complexification of the crisis of the museum object more generally. It is through such a frame that they will be examined here.

In this exposition of the title of the dissertation, then, have been revealed some of the interlocked questions and problems that inhere within object, museum, and architecture. The three terms carry a diverse range of implications, and the fact that these are commonly collapsed and conflated is significant, curious, and often overlooked. This dissertation aims to unravel some of their mutual imbrications and implications, to examine them separately, and then to put them back together and locate them in two specific museum buildings.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

After a decade of literal placement where the object took centre stage, often to reinforce the belief that art was a myth, the object now functions differently. Instead of acting as a sign, foil, or tombstone, the object derives its power from being the only solid thing in a world of individualised flux and unreality.¹

Sacha Craddock

Historical time is constructed by the museum’s formal presence. As an object the museum works in terms of its realization of the effective presence of built time.²

Andrew Benjamin

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

FIGURE 1: Above: The forecourt of the Museum of Sydney on the Site of First Government House as it stands today, with the Edge of the Trees installation, and (below) the architects’ early proposal for a monumental statue of Governor Phillip and row of ceremonial flagpoles.
ONE MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF MUSEUMS

Let me begin with an example. It is a particular moment, in the history of a specific museum, which is revealing of much larger shifts and trends in the institution, and thus serves to open some of the broader issues and questions that this dissertation sets out to address.

When Melbourne architects Denton Corker Marshall (DCM) were commissioned to design a museum on the site of First Government House, near Circular Quay in the city of Sydney, they clearly saw the need for some kind of commemorative gesture. The site is valued by the dominant, celebratory historical narrative as a positive symbol of British settlement in Australia, of heroic pioneers at the apparent ‘origin’ of the Australia we know today. Accordingly, during the design process for the Museum of Sydney on the Site of First Government House (MoS), as the museum was eventually to be named, the architects proposed that in the forecourt of the new building should be a monumental statue of Governor Phillip, the first ruler of the colony, complimented by a row of ceremonial flagpoles. A rendering of the proposed statue, in an early presentation drawing (figure one, below), shows it to be a fairly conventional monumental figure facing towards Bridge Street, while the flagpoles form an axis just to the right of the museum’s entry. The statue would have been an imposing figure, elevated on a pedestal, and asserting a strong spatial and symbolic presence across First Government House Place. The statue, together with the flagpoles, would have constituted an orthodox historical and commemorative narrative: Governor Phillip would preside over and ritually celebrate a ‘white sacred site’.

But what is significant for the present thesis is that during the design process, the museum’s management decided to abandon the proposed statue. Instead, the decision was made to tender for a public artwork, an installation to be entitled The Edge of the Trees. The site of the installation was to be just beside the entry, exactly where the architects had planned their axis of flagpoles. In the event, the commission was won by artists Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley, a non-

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Aboriginal and an Aboriginal artist respectively, working in collaboration. The installation was duly constructed, and in its final form (figure one, top) is a series of vertical poles of timber, steel and sandstone, inlaid, carved, and burned with names and texts, and containing glass covered niches filled with oxides, human hair, honey, shells, bones, and other substances resonant with symbolism. The line of trees at the edge of a clearing was to provide a metaphor for the membrane or line of contact which both joins and separates apparently conflicting or polarised forces - the land in its wild and cultivated states, the contact of Aborigines and settlers at the first landing, and their intertwined histories since then. The title and the metaphor, both specified in the competition brief by head curator Peter Emmett, were derived from a quotation from the historian Rhys Jones. Rather than being a celebration, the museum was calling for a work that commemorated absence, of that which is past and dead, whether settler or Aborigine, plant or animal, event or object, demolished house or felled tree.

Now on an obvious, concrete level, the replacement of statue with installation demonstrates a shift in the ascendency and balance of contested historical narratives. It neatly marked out the terms of the historiographic debate in Australia: the reinterpretation and pluralisation of Australian history, the questioning of established ‘heroic’ narratives, and the idea that there may be another reading of the event, in which Phillip’s landing was not a beginning, but a turning point with often disastrous consequences. It acknowledged that the site is now as much a symbol of Aboriginal dispossession and forced convict labour as of the more salutary aspects of modern Australian society. Most of all, the shift acknowledged that history and national identity are themselves (now) contested, and made up of a web of received ideas, mythologies, facts, and fictions. It was a victory for ‘black armband history’, a term that looms large in current Australian political and

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4 ‘…the ‘discoverers’ struggling through the surf were met on the beaches by other people looking at them from the edge of the trees. Thus the same landscape perceived by the newcomers as alien, hostile, or having no coherent form, was to the the indigenous people their home, a familiar place, the inspiration of dreams.’ Rhys Jones, ‘Ordering the Landscape’, in Seeing the First Australians, ed. Ian Donaldson and Tamsin Donaldson, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 185.
historical discourse, and which is in many ways encapsulated in the MoS as an institution, and even more pointedly in its statue/installation dialectic.5

In the sense that it is explicitly self-reflexive and critical museum, that it examines and critiques established versions and understandings of Australian history in an integrated spatial and aesthetic response, in its concern for the marginal and the fragmentary, its presentation of plural historical narratives, and particularly its blurring of the disciplinary boundaries between art and history – for all of these reasons the MoS can be read as a primary example of a new genre of social and political history museum, which challenges the traditional museum apparatus itself. In the decision to commission the Edge of the Trees, a traditional, Colonialisit celebration of Governor Phillip reigning over the fledgling colony at the apparent ‘origin’ of the Australia we know today, gave way to an evocation of the immaterial and of loss, of the overlap and mutual influence between settler, Aboriginal, and convict histories through their shared experience of the land. This shift was indicative of changing attitudes towards history in society, but also, significantly, of the way in which this might be critically reflected in museums, and represented there through art. In this sense, it is a manifestation of developments in museum framing and practice that go well beyond the context of Australia.

On another level, the shift between statue and the installation embodied two very different approaches to commemoration – their respective modes of monumentality. This is true in the sense that the temporality implied by art that takes an historical form – the statue – is quite different from explicitly contemporary art – the installation – that takes history as its subject. A statue is art charged with the specific re-membering and re-presentation of an historical figure – it is of someone more than it is something. It implicitly makes history, and not art, the primary precondition through which it is apprehended. The proposed statue would thus have been monumental in the sense of being massive and enduring, and thus projecting itself into the future, but also in the sense of effacing the present by representing the past for the future. The Edge of the Trees installation, on the other

hand, is a private, subjective space, which stages an aesthetic engagement with history in the present. It does not attempt to literally re-present its historical subject, but preserves historical distance, by emphasising sensory experience and affect in the present moment. In terms of their very different modes of interaction between commemorative object and perceiving subject, then, the replacement of the statue with the installation can be seen as a microcosm of another more general museological shift, this time from an emphasis on self-contained, autonomous museum objects, to thinking and perceiving museum subjects. More than this, it underscores the museum’s important but often overlooked role as memorial and space for mourning.

The third and final point of comparison between statue and installation lies in the different demands that each mode makes of the beholder – the level of interaction between art object and beholding subject. The statue is traditionally an isolated object on a pedestal, re-presenting an historical figure as a self-contained object in space. A statue offers little space for personal engagement or empathy; it's gaze is always directed elsewhere. The installation, on the other hand, presupposes that the beholder will literally enter the work, become immersed in it, and come to understand it conceptually by exploring it spatially and sensorially. The *Edge of the Trees* installation is addressed to an audience on a number of levels. It makes a literal ‘address’ to the audience through aural, spoken elements – many of the poles conceal speakers, which murmur to the visitor in languages both indigenous and imported. More than this, the texts carved into its surfaces invite both sensory and intellectual engagement. It could be said, then, that the statue is aesthetic primarily by virtue of the tradition of statuary as an art form, and the installation is aesthetic in the much older sense of appealing to the senses. And here again, the space between statue and installation marks a much larger museological shift, not only towards a direct address and engagement of the beholder, but to subjective experience as itself the object of the museum. It also blurs established categories of and boundaries between artwork and artefact, in a manner that has far-reaching implications.

The two forms – statue and installation – thus manifest some important and revealing contrasts, all of which can be extrapolated outwards into wider museum practice, and significantly also to new museum architecture. If the statue is
monumental and public, traditionally a realistic representation of an historical figure, and above all an art object, an installation is personal and subjective both in its creation and reception, and above all it is predicated upon aesthetic experience, being anterior to identification and interpretation. The distinction is most clearly drawn in the way in which the two different forms both embody and provoke memory and affect. The statue is a freestanding, self-contained, vertically oriented object, and is thus ‘monumental’ in a stylistic sense, as well as in the sense of enduring in an unchanging form. The installation, on the other hand, is a mutable, memorial space more than a monumental object. The statue is defined, public and authoritative, while the installation is private, subjective, and unbounded. Their relative approaches to commemoration are inseparable from their method of engaging with the beholder.

The installation interacts with an audience – it is truly interactive, in that favourite term of museum professionals – in a way that the statue emphatically refuses. And it is this conception of subjective experience as itself a kind of aesthetic medium that marks perhaps the most significant manifestation here of broader shifts in museum practice: it marks the blurring and overlap between art and history, and demonstrates that a museum can be engaged as much in the curation of experience as in the curation of objects. Put another way, it marks the increasing aestheticisation of museums, and this, I would argue, is a highly significant development. Where art and history have often been conceived in modern times as being differentiated or opposed, they are interwoven in the MoS, not as opposites but as the two ends of a single, experiential scale.

It is not unusual for a contemporary museum to recognise the value of ‘interaction’ as a means by which the visitor can actively engage with culture and history. But what is unusual and revealing about the MoS strategy is its offering of contemporary art as part of the museological strategy of a history museum, a counterpoint and commentary to its other installations of objective and objectival artefacts. This museum presents art as a means for the visitor to engage with the ephemeral or unrepresentable aspects of a difficult history. The questions that this opens are profound: concerning distinctions between the categories of object displayed in museums, between genres of museum, and between types of museum representation and experience. Museums are powerless to represent loss
and absence as such, and bald representations of historical fact are not always equal to the task of commemoration, especially in the case of histories that are tragic, contested, or conditioned by a lack of material evidence. The MoS example seems to argue that it is at this point that history must give way to art.

In an important sense, the *Edge of the Trees* installation says what the museum apparatus can not – and what the statue would not want to. It is able to do so precisely because it is an artwork. It exists entirely in the space of representation; it is not subject to the museological laws of evidence or objectivity, nor is it subordinated to a specific didactic representational function, nor to any specific, instrumental role at all. For all of these reasons, the moment where the statue of Governor Phillip gave way to the *Edge of the Trees* installation encapsulates much larger shifts which, it will be argued throughout this dissertation, are now also occurring in other museums, and more particularly in museum architecture as itself art.

Michael Müller has observed that contemporary museum architecture is characterised by ‘ambitious efforts to consecrate or position architecture once again as a higher, indeed the highest, form of Art’. Museum architecture, as both the container and the contained, as both an artwork and a functional building, can thus be examined as the ground where much larger questions are being played out.

**METHODOLOGY AND OBJECT OF THE DISSERTATION**

The object of this dissertation is the museum, and in particular that genre of museums dedicated to human social and political history. It has a particular focus on those museums that deal with ‘unspeakable’ or contested histories, and which can be framed as ‘critical’ museums. The broad field of the dissertation is the history, theory and practice of museums, as it intersects and interacts with the history, theory and criticism of art and architecture. It is also concerned, on a secondary level, with historiography, critical theory, and cultural studies.

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The thesis proposes that it is theoretically untenable to separate aesthetic from historiographic questions in the museum, and therefore that the status of the museum building as itself a work of art becomes central. This is particularly true of the tension between architecture as art and architecture as the receptacle for the museum apparatus. The study is concerned with exactly how architecture is an art form, a question that is strangely under-examined within the discipline itself, and finds that some recent history museums, particularly those that have a self-consciously postmodern or critical focus, are presently revising the status and position of art within the museum matrix. The focus of the study on museums of impossible histories makes this point even more clearly, since art is there given a privileged role in presenting the unpresentable.

The dissertation is based on original research in the form of analysis and interpretation – principally the analysis of both the primary literature and of actual museums. By approaching the field of museology from a base in architecture, it examines the museum as an architectural genre, and analyses the implications of built form for the museum as an institution or apparatus. These implications are shown, particularly in the two primary examples, to be profound. The study is therefore original in its reframing of general theoretical questions in museology, its address of a new and under-examined genre of museum, and its approaching the field from an uncommon angle - through architecture and the analysis of built form.

The methodology is primarily analysis and theoretical exegesis, and the principal object of the dissertation is therefore the existing body of literature on the museum institution, along with a selection of other theoretical texts. The dissertation draws upon various theoretical figures to illustrate aspects of the argument; works of museum history by Susan Pearce, Carol Duncan, and Tony Bennett are proven to be instructive, and key works of museum criticism by Antoine-Chrystome Quatremère de Quincy, Theodor Adorno, and Fillipo Marinetti are examined in depth. Adorno’s aesthetic theory also provides a means of approaching the crucial question of autonomy in art and architecture, and his work assists in developing a larger argument about the possible autonomy of museums. Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde and Michael Fried’s seminal essay on art and objecthood both shed light on these same issues, and are used to formulate a larger theoretical framework. The museum’s object-based representation of history,
with its logic of ‘evidence’, bears analysis in terms of Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism, his thoughts on collecting and the collector, and his theory of Baroque allegory. The museum can be placed within a more general history of institutions and institutionalisation as articulated by Michel Foucault, while Jean Baudrillard provides a ‘system of collecting’ to explain the psychology of collectors in relation to their objects, and Didier Maleuvre illuminates collecting in the melancholy light of the *momento mori*. Numerous secondary figures and accounts are also examined.

The study’s textual or theoretical argument is supported and illustrated by first hand analysis of two museum examples: the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra. Both of these are social history museums with a critical approach to the role and method of the museum. They attempt to address, at the level of architecture, the critical questions facing the contemporary institution, and this had led to the buildings themselves engaging in a high-profile, risky, and often controversial participation in public discourse. If both of these museums, to a greater or lesser extent, address unpresentable histories - whether genocide and systematic anti-semitism in the Jewish Museum or the contested history of the European settlement of Australia in the NMA - they use aesthetic devices to bring historical and museological ideas to presentation. These museum buildings are critically examined here in architectural as well as museological terms. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the actual histories themselves are not at issue here – the dissertation is concerned with historiography, and the museum’s changing role in it, more than with history, or these particular histories, as such.

The significance of the dissertation lies, firstly, in its reformulation or restatement of basic conceptual issues in the existence of museums. This in turn bears upon the interpretation of recent history museums - an account of the reasons for their formation, and the critical terms under which they might be examined. With its emphasis on the museum’s overlap between historical fact and aesthetic representation, the dissertation also explores the disciplinary distinction between museum types, particularly the art museum and the history museum. The dissertation aims to be both topical and timely. In recent years, in Australia as elsewhere, a ‘museum boom’ has frequently been noted. Many of these new museums have been purpose-built, and it is clear that architecture has a significant
role to play in the framing, both literal and figurative, of these institutions. Nevertheless this cultural and architectural phenomenon is still in the early stages of examination and theorisation, and this dissertation represents a contribution to this growing literature.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

Throughout the history of museums, the institution has been accused of ‘killing’ objects by taking them out of their context and ‘life’ in the world, and re-placing them in its own timeless space. Many critical accounts of museums find this separation to be problematical, and use it to support a criticism of the museum as a kind of ‘mausoleum’. Such ideas have led many museums, in recent years, to a conscious shift towards entertainment, populism, and what might be described as a general attempt at ‘liveliness’. One casualty of this shift has been that actual objects have come, in some cases, to seem expendable, or able to be substituted with various forms of representation. The thesis of this dissertation goes against the grain of this current trend, arguing that objects are essential to museums, and seeking to re-examine the mortifying effects of the museum as potentially redemptive, both of objects themselves and potentially, also, of the institution as a whole. It also proposes that such deathly effects and affects may have a value, significance, or pleasure for museum audiences.

The museum’s processes of decontextualisation have been particularly contested in the case of art objects, and the art museum has been accused since its inception of producing and reinforcing a separation between art and life. At the same time, however, the art museum has been used to support a particular conception of art as transcending the vagaries of time, space and the everyday – a conception of art as autonomous from the historical conditions under which it was produced. The autonomy of art, an idea that is both produced and corroborated by the institutional frame, represents a way in which the museum’s decontextualisation of artworks and artefacts has been conceived in positive terms. The distinctions between artworks and quotidian objects or artefacts, and by extension between art museums and museums of all other kinds, thus provides an important precedent in which it might be held to be good to have ‘killed’ the object. In pursuit of this, the
dissertation shifts to the examination of two specific social history museums, where art and artefact co-exist. These museums deal with contested or unpresentable histories by allowing art, or the art of architecture, to fill the vacuum left by the inadequacy or simple lack of historical artefacts. Art is called upon to ‘stand in’ for historical events. This is true both in terms of museum contents – that is, artworks and artefacts, and museum form – that is, purpose-built museum architecture. In this way, the thesis brings together the particular concerns of purpose-built museum architecture, and the particular problem of the representational limit of the museum artefact, in Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin, and Ashton Raggatt MacDougall’s National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

In examining what it is about these particular works of art and architecture that enables them to take such a role, the dissertation finds a curious convergence. On the one hand, it is only through the autonomy of the works, in the sense of their existence in the space of representation, and their freedom from having to act as evidence of anything other than themselves, that they are able to stand in for the unpresentable. On the other hand, it is only through their site specificity, their political engagement, and their emphasis on the phenomenal experience of the beholder, that they can have a meaningful function as memorials. Thus it is only because the works are both autonomous and engaged, universal and specific, figurative and abstract, and perhaps most importantly because they project an object character or artefactuality, that they can take these diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory roles. Each of them can also be read allegorically, as manifesting the issues facing the contemporary museum in leitmotifs of autonomy, deathliness, and objecthood.

A dialectical cycle thus seems to be completing itself: long after the avant-garde’s strenuous efforts to liberate art from the museum and re-connect it with the conditions of everyday life, art seems to have returned to the institutional fold, but this time to the history museum. Of course, in an age where art can legitimately be displayed in shop windows, abandoned warehouses and train stations, it hardly seems revolutionary to shift it from the hallowed atmosphere of the art museum to the equally rarefied history museum. Furthermore it can be argued that the representation of history in the traditional museum is intrinsically aesthetic, not only in its display techniques, but also in the (often overlooked) aesthetic properties of
ON THE OBJECT OF THE MUSEUM AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

artefacts themselves. Given this, the reciprocity that already exists between art museums and history museums is considerable. But in fact this new museum trend is revolutionary, not because of where or how art is displayed, but because of how it is employed — not only as artefact or evidence, but as part of an integrated museological and architectural strategy. The presence of contemporary art in a history museum demonstrates that category confusion — the projection of a deliberate ambiguity as to whether the exhibit is art or history, artwork or artefact — can itself be a legitimate aesthetic and affective strategy. The incorporation of artworks as such can be seen to represent a loosening of the museum’s iron laws of objectivity and hard fact. This surely springs from the self-critical stance of the postmodern museology, and the museum’s acceptance that it, too, is a form of representation. With its emphasis on individual, subjective accounts, the new, critical museum would thus be giving space to art in order to open new dimensions for the representation of history.

Paradoxically, then, it is only at the point where historical artefacts, as evidence, are defeated by the enormity of what they are called upon to prove, where silence, emptiness and absence seem the only appropriate response, that it is proven that objects are truly irreducible from museums. The deathliness of museums, their mortification of culture, is enacted by collecting objects from the world and re-contextualising them in a new temporal-spatial order. But this very process of ‘killing’ objects can equally be seen as a recasting or reinvestment of meaning, one that is certainly different, but no less significant than the objects’ meaning in the real world.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CHAPTERS

The preface, Object, Museum, Architecture, serves to draw distinctions between different types of museum, to define some specific terms that are employed throughout the dissertation, and most importantly to make a detailed exposition of its title. This Introduction makes a rhetorical summary of the argument, and the way that it is articulated through the chapter structure.

The purpose of the second chapter, A Critical History of the Museum; A History of Museum Criticism, is twofold. Firstly it aims to lay out the field of
museology through a comprehensive survey of the historical and contemporary literature on museums. The chapter identifies and pursues key themes in the literature, but also points out discrepancies and omissions, to be taken up later in the dissertation. The second purpose of the chapter is to illustrate the starting position and critical stance to be taken in the dissertation as a whole. The first half of the chapter deals primarily with the literature and established authorities of museum history and historiography. The guiding question here is whether museum history is linear, causal and continuous, or whether it is conditioned by a series of historical thresholds and ruptures, and therefore whether such a history is possible at all. This question hinges in turn around another: whether museums are defined by and derive from material objects and collections, or from immaterial ordering systems. The intention here is to place contemporary debates about the status (and possible dispensability) of the museum object into historical context, with the ultimate purpose of proving that objects are central to the museum. This argument is counterpointed in the second half of the chapter, which makes a survey of the burgeoning contemporary literature of museums, finding that the institution is presently positioned at yet another threshold in its history. But while the fate of the object in the postmodern museum may seem increasingly precarious, the chapter concludes that identifying and working through this precariousness is a timely and important theoretical project. The chapter draws upon the work of many significant museum historians and scholars, including Susan Pearce, J. Mordaunt Crook, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Douglas Crimp, and Tony Bennett. It also examines the work of broader cultural theorists including Michel Foucault and Pierre Nora.

If the second chapter establishes the contested meaning, value and status of the object as a central problematic of the contemporary museum, the third chapter, ‘The Dead, the Deadly and the Deathly: Museums and the mortification of culture’, draws out an important common thread that runs throughout the literature of museums – the connection between museum and mausoleum. The chapter finds that the connection between museums and the dead, the deadly and the deathly is indeed irreducible at the level of museum object, subject, collection, institution, and also museum architecture. Several authorities are employed to illustrate this argument: the work of Stephen Dubin
provides the idea of the museum as the solidification of culture, which the chapter takes as a point of departure, while Jean Baudrillard’s work is used to illustrate the psychology, subjectivity, and ‘system’ of the collected object; Walter Benjamin’s writings are used to point out the important differences between private and public collections; and Didier Maleuvre opens a reading of objects as momento mori, and museums as enshrining the mortality of culture itself. The work of Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach is employed to point out the funereal and ritualistic character of museum architecture and museum space. But more than simply demonstrating the inherence of death at every level of the museum, the chapter draws significant conclusions from it. The first is that the contemporary critical literature also recognises the deathliness of museums, but that almost without exception it interprets this negatively; the contemporary literature of museums sets up an easy and unquestioned dichotomy between a rhetoric of ‘liveliness’ and one of ‘deathliness’. Indeed, it is possible to propose a historical crux in the history of museums hinged around this very opposition – the ‘postmodern’ museum could be identified precisely through its active repudiation of deathliness in favour of populism, subjective experience, and life in the present. This move can also be framed as a move towards theatricality, identified by art critic and theorist Michael Fried as an important shift in contemporary art practice after Minimalism. The idea that museum practice might directly reflect developments in contemporary art is significant, and points towards the increasing aestheticisation of museums. This has important implications for architecture, and for the museum institution more generally.

Chapter four is entitled ‘Killing Art to Write its History’: Decontextualisation and the Avant-garde. Retaining a focus on historical critical accounts of the museum, this chapter makes a close reading of several key historical works of museum criticism, works that are amongst the most vehement, as well as the most significant, in the literature. Stretching across a broad chronology, the texts were authored by Antoine-Chrystome Quatremère de Quincy (here approached through Daniel Sherman), Theodor Adorno, and Fillipo Marinetti. It is no coincidence that their works all centre upon art museums, and particularly upon the meaning of the art object in relation to its context – both outside and within the museum. The art object provides a particularly pointed exemplar of the
crisis facing all museum objects, and this problematic is often examined in a more lucid and explicit way through the discourse of art theory and criticism than through museum studies itself. More than this, art’s relation to its institutional frame has been questioned, often to devastating effect, by artists working in the genre of institutional critique. The third chapter thus examines the question of how and why art museums are commonly distinguished from other types of museum. The art object is proposed as a test case – but also, paradoxically, an exception – through the idea of autonomy, introduced here through Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde.

The fifth chapter, Alienation and Negativity: The Critical Function of Autonomous Art expands and deepens the argument begun in the previous chapter, that there is a correspondence between decontextualisation, deathliness, and autonomy. The argument is pursued here through a close reading of Theodor Adorno’s theory of the social utility of autonomous art, in which the critical function of art is enacted precisely through its detachment and alienation from, yet despairing dedication to, empirical reality. This provides an aperture through which the decontextualisation and deathliness of museum objects might be seen as not a negative thing, but rather a means through which they, and by extension the museum itself, might take a critical and analytical stance upon the world. The chapter proposes that this critical role may occur at the level of the institution, and also, perhaps most importantly, be enacted by museum architecture.

Chapters six and seven move to bring to bear the theories, ideas, and critical tools developed in the preceding chapters on a new set of questions and a new set of objects – namely two specific works of museum architecture. If the first chapters were most concerned with the status of objects as the contents of museums, the two case study chapters examine the way these matters are modified, and repeated, at the level of museum form – that is to say, museum architecture. This is made more complex by the fact that a purpose-built museum building is also, in a sense, part of the contents of that museum – it is also a museum object, and this becomes particularly significant in cases where traditional, evidential museum objects are either absent, or inadequate to the representation of a difficult history. The assumption here, then, is that similar questions apply at the different scales of museum objects and museum architecture – questions of the
FIGURE 2: Jewish Museum, Berlin (above) and National Museum of Australia, Canberra, (below).
object character of architecture, the distinction between artworks and artefacts, and the ways in which art, and architecture, may ‘stand in’ for certain unpresentable aspects of history.

In each case, the terms of analysis under which the separate museums are examined are suggested by the objects themselves. This means that in chapter six, *Presenting the Unpresentable: Allegories of Destruction at the Jewish Museum in Berlin*, the Jewish Museum is argued to be a stylistic rebuttal of Nazi neo-classical architecture, and proposed as a kind of deliberate, constructed ruin. This is pursued through Walter Benjamin’s theory of Baroque allegory, in opposition to the romantic aestheticisation of decay in Albert Speer’s ‘Theory of Ruin Value’. Likewise, in chapter seven, *Theme Park or Mausoleum: ‘Black armband’ Populism at the National Museum of Australia*, this museum is analysed as flirting with architectural populism and popular culture, but beneath this is detected a more complex critique of historiography, and contentious version of Australian history and national identity. While the NMA may have aspects of populism, and certainly contains popular culture, it also has elements of its apparent opposite, the museum as mausoleum.

The connections and disjunctions between these two return to notions of the museum’s deathliness and its mortification of culture, recasting the apparently dichotomous relationship between ‘lively’ and ‘deathly’ museum approaches as something more like a dialectic, and complicating the question of exactly how and where architecture is an art. Taken together, these museums manifest a new kind of test case or limit condition – not only of the museum object, but also of the museum apparatus and museum architecture itself. This is because they are social history museums dedicated to representing and commemorating what might be called impossible histories – namely historical narratives that are so problematical, contested or unpresentable that they seem to defeat the museum institution altogether. Most importantly, both buildings are functional if challenging museum spaces, but also highly invested allegorical artworks, of great affective power.

In the eighth and concluding chapter of the dissertation, *The Art of the Architecture of Museums*, one idea emerges as a particular key: that the mausoleum character of museums – at the level of architecture, as form embodying content – is found to be crucial to their critical function. More than this,
the art of their architecture, that which lies outside rational function, acts as the emblem or allegory for both their deathliness and their autonomy. The ambiguous object character of architecture, as both art and artefact, has the potential to contribute to a kind of reconciliation, a built dialectic, which incorporates the alienated, critical museum institution, whilst being predicated upon the experience of an empathetic individual beholder. The artefactuality or object character of such architecture is responsible for its affect and its turning back towards the world. The conclusion returns via a different path to a series of key authorities, contentions, and arguments made earlier in the dissertation, and finds that the very value of the museum lies in its separation from life in the world – its autonomy and its deathliness. And it is the art in the architecture of museums – that which is excess to a specific and determined means-end relationship – which is both the sign and the instrument of this alienated and critical stance.
CHAPTER TWO

A Critical History of the Museum;
A History of Museum Criticism

The accumulation and exposition of objects can be seen as an enduring activity with a long history, although the identities and uses of these accumulations have been subject to abrupt changes. The form and target of the articulations of subject, object, space, and power have no essential ‘nature’; ‘collections’ and ‘museums’ take on contingent identities according to shifts and reversals in both the relations of forces and the random play of events.¹

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

In current debates around the changing nature of contemporary culture, many of the defining fictions of our everyday world have been identified as under threat: the legitimacy of the ‘grand narratives’ of science and reason are in decline; there is a fragmentation of taste and style; representation and classification have become unprecedentedly problematical; and what were once called ‘truths’ are increasingly being dubbed ‘fictions.’²

Sharon Macdonald and Roger Silverstone

FIGURE 3: British Museum, London (above), and Musée d’Orsay, Paris (below). The Museum is increasingly recognised as a social space, with emphasis placed on museum subjects as well as museum objects.
INTRODUCTION

Given the range of excellent accounts presently available, to make a general study of the history of the museum institution would be a redundant task, and largely irrelevant to the present project. This chapter is thus not intended to be an exhaustive historical survey. While it may be loosely chronological, this is more an organisational device than an indication of method, or intention. The chapter presents a constellation of themes, ideas and theories, drawn from museum literature and from related fields, which suggest a theoretical approach to the museum institution. While this project has elements of being a critical history of the museum, then, the emphasis tends more towards a history of museum criticism.

The intention in collecting and laying out a range of critical accounts here is twofold. First, by surveying the literature in the field the thesis will define a specific critical position through exposition and discussion of authorities from the existing literature. The remainder of the thesis will assume the critical stance thus adumbrated here. The second purpose of this chapter is the introduction and exposition of texts and ideas that will later be drawn upon again. The discussion begun here thus represents the opening gambit in a series of arguments that continue throughout the study, and provides the historical base upon which the rest of the thesis is constructed. It leads into later chapters by providing the terms and framework of analysis of the two case-study museums.

The chapter is structured into two sections. The first is an examination and exposition of various accounts of the history of the museum institution. The guiding question here is whether this history is linear and continuous or whether it is conditioned by a series of historical ruptures, and therefore whether such a history can be conceptualised and identified at all. This question in turn opens another: whether museums are defined by, and derive from material things and objectival collections, or from immaterial or conceptual ordering systems. The modern museum's immediate ancestor, the Cabinet of Curiosities or Wunderkammer, is examined here as a test case: does it fit into a history of objects or of ordering systems? The Wunderkammer has been regarded on the one hand as containing the germ of the modern museum, and conversely of being irrevocably other to modern systems of thought. This division is explored through the writing of Michel Foucault, which although not specifically directed to the history of the museum,
serves to illuminate some of the broader historical shifts that it manifests, and the inherence of the museum institution within the modern episteme.

If the first section investigates and questions the events that led to the formation of the museum in its modern form, the second section leaps the intervening period to examine the discourse of the 'new museology'. This critical discourse is concerned with exposing the modernist museum's epistemological and political complicities from a specifically self-reflexive, postmodern standpoint. Making a survey of the burgeoning contemporary literature of museums, this section finds that the museum is now positioned at yet another threshold in its history. The fate of the object in the postmodern museum seems increasingly precarious, but this section concludes that objects are conceptually essential to museums. It remains to the following chapter to demonstrate this through the special case of the decontextualised artwork.

PART ONE: HISTORIES, ORIGINS, IDEOLOGIES

For my purposes here it is less interesting and productive to pursue the 'real' origins of the museum, than the way that such origins have been derived, and represented, in museum literature. Speculations on the beginnings of the museum cover a broad range of possibilities, and each carries with it a range of ideological implications. Certain conceptions of the museum, most often springing from a particular version of its origins, have been used to authorise and legitimise certain epistemological and political systems. Seen from the vantage point of the present, some of these systems are problematic, and the corroboration of the museum in perpetuating them even more so, given its presumption of objectivity. From promoting racist and Eurocentric notions of 'primitivism', progress, and civilisation, through to exclusionary exhibition policies and the perpetuation of class structures, museums have always been political. Or to put it in more specifically Foucauldian terms the museum, as an institution that stores, controls and presents knowledge, is deeply implicated in the play of power. Textual accounts of the origin of

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museums can thus be used as the starting point for a deeper search for the ideology inherent in the institution.

Susan Pearce divides the history of the museum into four successive phases: the 'archaic', which includes prehistoric European collections, classical Greek and Roman models of the museum, and medieval treasuries; the 'early modern', which includes Renaissance collections and 'Cabinets of Curiosities'; the 'classic modern' period which includes eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth-century museums, and the present 'postmodern' period, which includes museums from the mid-twentieth century onwards.\(^4\) Pearce's historical scale is longer than that of many other museum historians, who see it as a definitively modern institution, and begin its history in the Renaissance. J. Mordaunt Crook, for example, makes a neat formulation of the museum as 'a product of Renaissance humanism, eighteenth-century enlightenment and nineteenth-century democracy.'\(^5\) This three part division would encompass Pearce's 'early modern' and 'classic modern' periods, but make no account of either her 'archaic' or 'postmodern' periods. But the authors' agreement over the central three periods suggest that, despite earlier precedents, the museum is intimately connected and indeed characteristic of modernism, of the modernist worldview and construction of knowledge. This inherence becomes even clearer in challenges to the modernist orthodoxy in the second half of the twentieth century, and the early years of the twenty-first.

The two accounts serve as a neat introduction to this chapter, since, as Crook argues, the museum can only truly be described as having a continuous history after 1796, following the opening of the Louvre. To assert this is not to discount Pearce's longer scale of museum history, however, but to argue that her 'archaic' period constitutes a pre-history of the modern institution, and her 'postmodern' period a kind of post-script. Pearce's history is thus a series of phases, which are linked recognisably by the activity of collecting objects, and the constitution of an organised collection. The two positions thus offer two models of

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reading the museum's history: Crook sees a linear, causal, progressive
development over a defined historical period, which is quite separate from other
forms of collection both before or after, while Pearce reads the museum as one
moment in a series of wider historical trends and thresholds. Crook's schema is
defined by a particular, modern knowledge and understanding of the world,
manifest in a specific ordering system, while Pearce's is based around the activity
of collecting, regardless of the purpose to which the objects are then put, or the
system of thought which they express and reinforce. To put it another way, one
history is defined by a discontinuous history of immaterial ordering systems, and
the other by the continuous history of objects and collecting.

Extending Crook's logic, it is possible to conceive the ordering system of
the modern museum as forming a continuous history with, for instance, the library
and the encyclopaedia, more closely than with pre-modern collections. On the
other hand, following Pearce, the museum as a collection of objects might be more
closely related to the universal exposition or department store than to other centres
of knowledge such as the hospital or university. The implications of these two are
far-reaching, and the thesis will return to them in greater depth below. The
important thing to note here, however, is that the two systems are not entirely
incompatible, and indeed many museum histories pursue a kind of hybrid. As we
will see, this approach becomes problematical at the threshold between the
modern museum and its supposedly immediate ancestor, the Wunderkammer.
Before coming to that point, however, it is necessary to pursue some of the modern
museum's pre-history, since to begin with the opening of the Louvre would be to
ignore all of the organised and systematic forms of collection that were in existence
prior to that time. While these collections were not museums, they were museum-
like in important respects, and are as significant for the characteristics that didn't
survive as for those that did. In this, the etymology of the word museum itself is a
curious case.

Crook notes that the word museum, along with its French counterpart
musée, derives etymologically from the ancient Greek mouseion via the Latin
musaeum. A mouseion was originally a temple dedicated to the nine muses -
daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory.⁶ In these places, according to classical mythology, the muses would provide inspiration to artists and scholars in return for libations of milk and honey. This classical idea of a museum is intimately connected with memory – hence the etymological connection between ‘mind’, ‘muse’ and ‘memory’ – but it does not yet imply a collection, or at least not necessarily. Unlike some later Roman museums, which were private collections displaying the acquired spoils of imperial expansion, the Greek mouseion was dedicated to the ideal of the Greek ‘encyclopaedia’, the full circle of knowledge both of art and science.

The paradigmatic mouseion was Ptolemy’s library at Alexandria.⁷ Begun in the third century BC, this fabled library was part of a cultural precinct or complex that also included accommodation for scholars, and a collection of paintings and sculpture. Paula Young Lee argues that the library of Alexandria was used as a direct precedent for later neoclassical conceptions of the museum. The library’s positive historical associations, which ‘simultaneously evoked the glory of ancient Alexandria, the cultivation of the intellect, a monumental architecture, and the positive expression of political power,’ were all inherent in the neoclassical appropriation and re-use of the name museum. She argues, further, that French descriptions of the newly opened Louvre in 1793 as a museum, rather than musée, galerie or institut, were a direct allusion to this history. Since the Louvre is commonly represented by historians as the first ‘modern’ museum, Lee’s analysis of its foundation and principles is significant. But while the ancient model of the museum as a place of study, enlightenment, and inspiration may have been deliberately and directly emulated in the earliest modern museums, it would be a simplification to leap the intervening years between classical and neoclassical periods without examining the other precursors of the museum that developed during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

RELICS, WONDERS, CURIOSITIES AND THEIR CABINETS

During the medieval period the types of collection that most bear upon the history of museums were those held by religious orders. Monastic libraries and cathedral reliquaries held sacred books, paintings and ceremonial objects, not only keeping them safe, but also employing them to teach Christian theology to a largely illiterate populace. Objects of natural history, such as ostrich eggs, whale bones, the skins of gorillas and ‘unicorn horns’ all found their way into these ‘ecclesiastical miscellanies’, along with more conventional sacred relics. Such objects acted as prompts to religious affect, provoking inspiration and wonder at the miraculous diversity and strangeness of Divine Creation. Medieval cathedrals were, in this conception, ‘museums of the spirit’, representing and reinforcing religious belief and relating objects of both art and nature back to the central, metaphysical ‘truth’ of theology.

If such ‘sacred museums’ can be seen as spaces for the apotheosis of a Judeo-Christian religious worldview, it is tempting to draw an opposition with later, enlightenment museums - exemplars of a secular, rational-empiricist worldview that centres around scientific knowledge, rather than religious belief, as its absolute truth. But these are not simple opposites, in fact they work on quite different principles and premises, and ascribe a very different meaning and affect to objects. One provokes religious wonder, the other scientific interest and enquiry. Between these two poles, both historically and conceptually, lies an understanding of the object as curiosity, which is manifest in that intermediate, humanist phase of the museum’s history - the Renaissance Wunderkammer. The period also saw the

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9 In this sense, shrines and reliquaries formed a continuum with a variety of other representational elements of medieval churches, such as sculpture and stained glass.
10 Crook, The British Museum, p. 21-22. In this company, religious relics of ‘natural’ origin, like fragments of the true cross and the severed body parts of saints, would hardly have seemed out of place. See Bann, ‘Shrines, Curiosities, and the Rhetoric of Display’, p. 18.
12 The popularity of the Cabinet of Curiosities has undergone something of a Renaissance during the postmodern period, and is now a popular subject for study. One of the most authoritative texts is Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor eds., The Origins of Museums: The
earliest art collections as we know them today, in the princely *galleria* of the Renaissance aristocracy.

In general terms, there are two main differences between the cathedral and monastery collections of the medieval period and Renaissance collections of art or curiosities. Firstly, the latter were secular collections, and secondly they were private, in the sense that they belonged to an individual prince or aristocrat, or to a powerful family.\(^{13}\) The similarities are also significant, however, given that both types of collection had the character of a miscellany, and that they were both often markers of status, intended to demonstrate the owner’s wealth, prestige, and elevated place in the world. The princely art collections of the late Renaissance were often housed in sumptuous galleries that were also official reception rooms – ‘state ceremonial spaces that were meant to impress both foreign visitors and local dignitaries with the ruler’s magnificence’.\(^{14}\) While these spaces were often nominally open to the public, as Duncan and Wallach observe, ‘a visit to such a gallery was a visit to the prince, whether or not the prince was there to receive [the visitor],’\(^{15}\) a fact that was reinforced with strict requirements for dress and deportment.\(^{16}\) The objects in medieval and Renaissance collections may have produced a similar kind of affect, but it was for different reasons: the rise of humanism meant that the ‘wonder’ of objects in a *Wunderkammer* derived from a newfound interest in natural history at least as much as from religious fervour. But all of these relatively superficial similarities serve to mask the most profound development from the medieval to the renaissance model of collection, which is a

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\(^{13}\) Crook writes that some of the greatest of the Renaissance collections belonged to the Medici in Florence, the Este of Ferrarra, and the Montefeltro of Urbino and Gubbio. Other important natural history and scientific collections were created by individuals, including the Neapolitan chemist Ferrante Imperato, and the collection of Ole Worm in Copenhagen. See Impey and Macgregor eds., *The Origins of Museums*.


\(^{16}\) Dress requirements ranged from ‘anyone with clean shoes’ being able to enter the Belvedere in Vienna in 1792, to a requirement for plumed hat and sword to visit the royal collection at Versailles. See Catherine Slessor, ‘Breaking the Box’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 12, no. 1210, 1997, p.4, and Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1979, p. 22.
newfound understanding and conception of history as such. With the Renaissance interest in uncovering and restoring the objects and knowledge of classical Greece and Rome came a new sense of history, not as religious eternal presence, but as a progression:

The Renaissance approach to works of art and scientific specimens introduced a crucial element into the development of the modern museum: a sense of historical perspective. This new faculty, only dimly visible in the medieval world, emancipated exhibits from an overall religious-cum-magical context by breaking the cyclical time-scale of medieval metaphysics. The endless rhythms of season and liturgy, of astronomy and astrology, gave way to a sense of historical progression - the basis of museology as a science.\(^17\)

With the emphasis shifted from God to Man as the measure of all things, a history of the human race, of its cultural achievements and scientific discoveries, became conceivable. Not only objects of natural history, but also works of art could be appreciated for their own qualities, characteristics, and particularly their own temporality, rather than as reflections of an eternal Grand Scheme and demonstrations of divine omniscience.\(^18\) For the first time art came to be collected \textit{as such}, rather than seen as furnishing or decoration for the interior of palaces and churches; art came to be separated from architecture.\(^19\) With this the modern European tradition - of the separation of art from other products of the human hand, and the constitution of art and aesthetic experience as a separate realm with its own history and historicity - was enjoined.

\section*{THE WUNDERKAMMER}

The idea of the \textit{Wunderkammer} was remarkably widespread throughout Europe in the late sixteenth century. Most notable were the series of German variations on the theme, including the \textit{Raritätenkabinett, Kuriositätenkabinett, Naturalienkabinett,}

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as well as the *Kunstkammer*, *Wunderkammer* and others. These names designated a certain space for display, most often a small room or cupboard, as well as the collection itself, which, according to Francis Bacon, was to include

> [W]hatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things hath produced; [and] whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept...21

Affect in the *Wunderkammer* was not specific to the category of the object – whether an object of art, natural history, or manufacture, it was the capacity to provoke curiosity, indeed to be a curiosity, that mattered; thus objects of wildly divergent nature and provenance were displayed together. Stephen Bann has written that the term 'curiosity' has a meaning very specific to this historical period between the earlier rule of theology and the later rule of science: it is a term which 'would have had no meaning before 1550.'22 He writes that for later scholars 'the habit of "curiosity" was offensive because it attached itself almost obsessively to the individual object, rather than using classes of objects to arrive at general conclusions which would have the force of law.'23 This emphasis on singularity is characteristic of the *Wunderkammer*: on objects personally selected for their rare, unique, or freak properties, rather than as exemplars that could stand in for a whole series of other objects in an overriding taxonomy.

This very heterogeneity has been the source of some misunderstanding, since it is easy, from the perspective of the present, to fall into the trap of seeing the *Wunderkammer* as an eccentric miscellany, especially given the apocryphal provenance of the objects that were frequently found there. But Eva Schulz insists that 'at no time were the *Kunst-und-Wunderkammern* indiscriminate medleys born of a purely encyclopaedic zeal for collecting, or out of mere pleasure in oddities or a passion for representation. They were formed according to values based on the

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20 While the range of German 'cabinets' itself suggests a categorisation of objects, it is important to note that any single object could often have fitted equally well in any of these three categories, or could be moved from one to another as fashion or new-found knowledge dictated. See Impey and Macgregor, *The Origin of Museums*, p. 3
scientific knowledge of the time. Furthermore Impey and Macgregor describe the aim of the Cabinet as the representation of ‘universal nature’: ‘In reality, those very traits of diversity and miscellaneity which serve in our eyes to impair the serious intent of these collections were essential elements in a programme whose aim was nothing less than universality.’ It is important to note, then, that the Wunderkammer did not lack order, but rather displayed a different order to that of the later, modern museum.

There is some disagreement among museum historians, then, about the extent to which the modern museum, and its particular manifestation of modern notions of ‘history’ and ‘science’, evolved from earlier museum-like collections such as the Wunderkammer. Bann finds Renaissance ‘curiosity’ and enlightenment ‘science’ to be antithetical, while Schulz sees in Renaissance collections the stirrings of science as we now know it. Douglas Crimp dismisses as ‘folly’ the notion that the Wunderkammer evolved into the modern museum;

[A]nyone who has ever read a description of a Wunderkammer, or cabinet des curiosités, would recognise the folly of locating the origin of the museum there, the utter incompatibility of the Wunderkammer’s selection of objects, its system of classification, with our own. This late Renaissance type of collection did not evolve into the modern museum. Rather it was

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24 Schulz bases her comments on a detailed reading of four key texts from the early history of collecting, which contain insights into contemporary notions of collecting from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Examinations of microcosm / macrocosm relations (the idea of the Theatrum Mundi, or ‘theatre of the world’), the place of scholarship and the scholar, and the encyclopedic nature of these early collections are key characteristics of these texts. Eva Schulz, ‘Notes on the history of collecting and of museums’, in Interpreting Objects and Collections, ed Susan M Pearce, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 186.


26 Kevin Walsh writes that ‘whereas the museum displays which emerged during the nineteenth century and are still common today attempted a form of didactic linear narrative, a representation of progress through the ordered display of artefacts, the Wunderkammer attempted an articulation of universal knowledge through the possession and identification of objects. To name an object is to know it and understand its position within the order of things. The aim of most displays of the late Renaissance period was to represent a sense of unity between the various material phenomena extant in the two spheres of creation, art and nature...’ See Kevin Walsh, The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the post-modern world, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, p. 20.

27 ’Scientific activity is no longer confined to admiring the diversity of creation, but extends to evaluating works of human creation. Now, training the power of discrimination becomes the most important function of a collection. Thus scientific research within collections, up to then directed towards a passive glorification of creation, is superceded by a ‘new science’. ‘ Schulz, ‘Notes on the history of collecting and of museums’, p. 186.
dispersed; its sole relation to present-day collections is that certain of its "rarities" eventually found their way into our museums...  

While Crimp’s rhetoric is strong, I would argue that this passage serves to prove that there is a significant connection between the Wunderkammer and the modern museum, and that it lies in objects themselves. The system of classification used upon objects shifts dramatically between the two types of collection, certainly. The method of selection of objects is also, clearly, driven by quite different motivations. But the very fact that some of the ‘rarities’ originally collected in European Wunderkammer later emerged in modern collections demonstrates a (literally) material, tangible link. The Wunderkammer may have served to represent a fundamentally different understanding of the world and the individual’s place within it, but the point is that it used objects to make this representation. The real distinction, then, between these collections is in the system of knowledge and belief that objects are used to prove and represent – whether they are seen as sacred relics and proof of Divine Creation, as embodiments and prompts for curiosity, or as evidence of history or of a grand scientific scheme – the common thread is the objects themselves. The Wunderkammer can only be conceived as a direct ancestor of the museum, and the museum conceived as having a continuous history at all, if the history of museums is synonymous with the history of collections.

Now the mere presence of objects may seem a fragile, or even inconsequential, thread of commonality between museums and pre-museum collections. It is true that systems of knowledge and thought – that is, what objects have been used as evidence of – is generally privileged in the literature. And I am not attempting to make a case here for the museum as a simple or neutral collection of objects, without epistemological or ideological import. Objects and collections have long been seen as the museum’s base material, acted upon by intellectual processes, and transformed from raw into cooked by the imposition of order. This act of ordering, in accordance with a system of thought, has invariably been the privileged term in this couplet. This thesis has no wish to actually overturn this hierarchy, and indeed that may be impossible. But in pursuing the somewhat

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ON THE OBJECT OF THE MUSEUM AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

marginalised line of argument – that museums and collections of all kinds are bound by the presence of objects, and thus that it is possible to trace a consistent thread through the otherwise fractured history of the museum institution – I merely set out to make the following point: that the history of collections is linked to the significance that human beings have placed in inanimate things since time immemorial, and is a much older and more fundamental genealogy than the relatively brief history of Western thought, especially modern Western thought. It is therefore the presence of objects that gives museums relevance at the deepest level, which links it with much older, perhaps ‘primitive’ but also potent traditions.

The question of whether the modern museum is most closely derived from material collections, or from immaterial ordering systems, thus devolves into a chicken-and-egg argument. On the one hand an ordering system, to be manifest in the world in anything other than linguistic form, has to act upon some collection of pre-existing objects. On the other hand, the medieval reliquary and Renaissance Wunderkammer, not to mention prehistoric ‘hoards’ and grave objects, all had their own order, it was simply different from the rational historical system that we have come to see as the one, true, and only order.\(^{29}\) Michel Foucault famously demonstrated the ‘otherness’ of such orders when he quoted, in the preface to The Order of Things, Jorge Luis Borges’ account of ‘a certain Chinese encyclopaedia’;

…animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.\(^{30}\)

Foucault goes on to write that 'In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated

\(^{29}\) Collecting, as a social activity that binds groups together into a ‘collective’, has its roots in ritual and religious practices now lost to time. Collections such as ‘hoards’ and gatherings of grave objects have been dated back to the Neolithic period of 3000 BC, but in themselves surely derive from earlier ‘primitive’ accumulative practices. These prehistoric collections, organised though they were according to their own logics, bear only the remotest resemblance to later museum practices, except through the presence of objects themselves. See Susan Pearce, Museums, Objects and Collections: a Cultural Study, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1992, p. 91.

as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.\textsuperscript{31} This is also precisely the pleasure of examining pre-modern forms of collection. It would be simplistic to believe that order 'emerged' from within the Wunderkammer's collection, that the systems and taxonomies of the modern museum somehow sprang from the objects themselves. The modern museum is philosophically based upon, and ordered according to, a logic entirely foreign to both the medieval reliquary and Renaissance Wunderkammer. But equally, the ordering systems inherent to a modern conception of science and natural history could never have arisen without a collection to 'work on', a range of objects which could be re-ordered, differentiated, categorised, and arranged in a table.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{THE ENLIGHTENMENT MUSEUM}

The idea of progress, of continual evolution and improvement in human technical, artistic and scientific development, was central to the museum in its 'classical modern' phase. Growing out of Renaissance and enlightenment thought, the museum displayed a faith in the ability of the human race to 'master' the world by exploiting and manipulating the natural environment, and expressed this by subduing a heterogenous profusion of objects into the display of a homogenous, structured, tabular hierarchy. Time came to be seen not as a negative, destructive force, but as the agent of History, of the continual, linear unfolding of change and progress.\textsuperscript{33} The idea of social progress as a teleological movement from 'primitive' to 'civilised' states was the basis for notions of ethnographic hierarchy, manifest in colonialist notions of the 'exotic' and the 'savage'.\textsuperscript{34} The enlightenment ideal of 'rigid

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\textsuperscript{31} Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things}, p. xv.
\textsuperscript{32} Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has written perceptively of the historical interchangeability of the concepts of 'museum' and 'collection', and the ways that the 'meaning' of the same object can change dramatically within each. See Hooper-Greenhill, \textit{Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge}, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{33} Kevin Walsh, \textit{The Representation of the Past}, p. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{34} Walsh, \textit{The Representation of the Past}, p. 17. Walsh writes that during the nineteenth century 'A form of institutionalized racism was established. Since the Victorian period, archaeology and history have continuously been used as supportive evidence for the superiority of white European peoples, the most disastrous form manifesting itself in the
objectivism' was predicated on the belief that there were universal truths and laws - meta-narratives – that would explain the world, and that these were attainable through 'enlightened' scientific enquiry.\textsuperscript{35} As Kevin Walsh writes, 'Modernism can... be considered as a set of discourses concerned with the possibilities of representing reality and defining eternal truths',\textsuperscript{36} and the museum was one of the most powerful modes of representation for these 'truths'. The rise of the modern museum, in its rational positivist mode, is inseparable from the social and intellectual patterns of modern thought, especially as they were differentiated from the earlier, mythical and superstitious models of the medieval period, and to a certain extent the transitional period of the Renaissance.

The origin of the museum in this form was, however, far from inevitable, and was rather the result of a particular confluence of factors. Neil Harris names four in particular - the mid-nineteenth-century extension of knowledge through scientific enquiry, a surplus of wealth from new industry and trading patterns, an increasing domination over the natural world allowing the gathering and dissemination of artefacts from distant places and past times, and finally, a sense of historical discontinuity or separation brought about by industrialisation, urbanisation, secular challenges to the authority of religion, and democratic revolution.\textsuperscript{37} This was all manifest in changed methods and modes of human expression in the arts, and as Harris writes, 'this break of continuity, felt intensely by many intellectuals, artists, political leaders, and social critics, led to a prevailing sense of anxiety about the cultural fabric and stimulated a turn to new institutions as a means of conserving, consolidating, and connecting.'\textsuperscript{38} While these new institutions also included public libraries, universities, and hospitals, the museum was foremost amongst them as it provided an engaging, large-scale representation of the 'knowledge revolution', and provided an apparent bastion of 'authenticity' in

\textsuperscript{35} Walsh, \textit{The Representation of the Past}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{36} Walsh, \textit{The Representation of the Past}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{38} Harris, \textit{Cultural Excursions}, p. 135.
an increasingly unstable and ‘inauthentic’ world. Museums of natural history, science, and ethnology all served to reinforce meta-narratives of evolutionary progress, Western cultural superiority and domination over nature. More than this educational and epistemological function, however, they were also thought to serve as an antidote to some of the negative elements of modern life,

Rather than serve simply as a receptive vessel in which could be poured the accumulated knowledge, wealth, and loot of a newly managed world, [...] the museum also became a corrective, an asylum, a source of transcendent values meant to restore some older rhythms of nature and history to a fast-paced, urbanizing, mechanized society. Museums could be organized as settings to promote integration and solidarity, between social and economic classes, between humanity and nature, between mankind and time, or between human beings and the act of creation.

Of all museum types, art museums were thought to be the most socially and morally 'beneficial' in this respect. The idea that the contemplation of the finest, most exalted products of human hand would have a 'civilising' effect on the behaviour of the populace, especially the 'labouring classes', was one of the foundations of the modern museum as a public institution. This was demonstrated in dramatic form in the first such museum, the Louvre in Paris.

THE OPENING OF THE LOUVRE

The opening of the French royal collection to the public in 1793, following the French Revolution, is widely agreed to be the origin of the modern, public art museum. As early as 1747 critics had called for the Louvre to be opened to the public, and this had become official policy under Louis XVI; a committee was formed under the Comte d'Angiviller in 1777, to plan the opening of the Grand Galerie of the Louvre as a royal museum. These plans were overtaken by the tumultuous events of the Revolution, but it is important to note that the King's

39 On the importance of authenticity as a central pursuit in the modern period, see also Lisa C. Roberts, From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1997, pp. 94-104.
40 Harris, Cultural Excursions, p. 137.
41 Those calling for the museum to be opened included Lafont de Saint-Yenne, whose 1747 pamphlet was an early demand for the Louvre to be 'restored and transformed into a royal art gallery.' His call was followed by similar suggestions from philosophers such as Diderot and Voltaire. See Duncan and Wallach, ‘The Universal Survey Museum’, pp. 453-454.
motivation for planning the opening the royal collection to the public was similar to that of the later revolutionary government - a public art museum was a political instrument which conferred legitimacy, representing national identity in and through the transcendent ideals of art. The legitimating power of museums had already been recognised by other governments, and the Louvre was not the first European state collection to be made open to the public.\(^\text{42}\) It was, however, the first royal collection to be confiscated and forced open for a specific political and symbolic purpose; ‘[t]he Louvre, once the palace of kings, was reorganized as a museum for the people, to be open to everyone free of charge. It thus became a powerful symbol of the fall of the ancien regime and the creation of a new order.’\(^\text{43}\) The fact that decreeing the Louvre a public museum was one of the first acts of the new regime is telling.\(^\text{44}\) The ascendency of the new order over the old was expressed most potently in the Apollo gallery, in the display, as property of the people, of three royal crowns.\(^\text{45}\) Thus it is not only public ownership of the museum collection that is significant, but also public 'ownership' of sovereignty itself. Indeed the history of the modern museum has been seen by one historian as 'an index of royal decline.'\(^\text{46}\)

The decade following the fall of the monarchy in France saw something of an orgy of war and looting, and the requisition of art objects from all over Europe under the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte. The Italian campaign of 1796-1797 resulted in the appropriation not only of art works, but also of all manner of 'goods of artistic and scientific nature', including books, paintings, scientific instruments, typefaces, animals and 'natural curiosities'.\(^\text{47}\) Upon return these spoils were

\(^{42}\) One of the earliest public collections was the University art museum at Basel, opened in the 1670's, and German art collections were opened to the public, in Dusseldorf, Munich, Kassel and Dresden, in the 1750's. The first English natural history museum was the Ashmolean, at Oxford University, opened in 1683, and the British Museum, created from the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, was opened in 1759. See Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1979, pp. 22-23.


\(^{44}\) Duncan and Wallach, 'The Universal Survey Museum', p. 454.

\(^{45}\) These were a medieval crown, 'the coronation crown of Louis XV, and the coronation crown of Napoleon'. Duncan and Wallach, 'The Universal Survey Museum', p. 454.

\(^{46}\) Crook, *The British Museum*, p. 31.

\(^{47}\) See Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, pp. 24-25.
paraded through Paris in triumphal procession, and many of the most prized artworks went to the Louvre, which in 1803 was renamed the Musée Napoleon. The early history of the public art museum can thus be seen as one of revolution and theft. Founded on the death of a king, perpetuated by the imperialist activities of a dictator, the modern museum arose out of conflict as much as the swell of democracy. Unlike a multiplicity of earlier versions of the museum, the Louvre was 'neither private, nor royal, nor religious,' it was 'open to the public, overtly secular, and aggressively national.' All of these characteristics have, in varying degrees, been transmitted to the museum as we know it today, but they have also given rise to some lasting contradictions, as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill writes.

In France the museum as a public, democratic, state institution was born from the articulation of three general elements: republicanism, anti-clericalism, and successful aggressive war. The concurrent forces of these three elements (all of which existed in fields other than that of the museum, and none of which was new in itself) produced an apparatus with two deeply contradictory functions; that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education.

Linda Nochlin makes a similar observation when she writes that '[a]s the shrine of an elitist religion and at the same time a utilitarian instrument for democratic education, the museum may be said to have suffered from schizophrenia from the start.' In the space between these two contradictory functions, of educational apparatus and temple of the arts, lies a subtle lesson in civics. The early modern museum was an instrument for inculcating reverence for certain high cultural forms, reinforcing value systems, and perhaps most importantly for constituting 'society' and 'the public' as such. Tony Bennett has pursued this idea, of the museum as a 'disciplinary' institution, to influential effect.

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48 The Louvre was also called, at various times, the Museum National, Museum Français, and Musée Central. See Crook, *The British Museum*, p.34. The looted artworks included the *Apollo Belvedere*, *Laocoon*, *Dying Gaul*, Raphael's *Transfiguration*, and Correggio's *Saint Jerome*. See Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, pp. 25.
49 Crook, *The British Museum*, p.34.
50 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 171
51 Nochlin, 'Museums and Radicals', p. 8.
MUSEUM DEMOCRACY AND THE BIRTH OF THE 'PUBLIC'

Bennett’s critique of the museum reads the institution less in the context of a history of collections than a history of public display. He aligns the nineteenth century museum with ‘disciplines and technologies of display’ developed through earlier panoramas, Mechanics’ Institute exhibitions, art galleries, arcades, and especially world expositions. These exhibitionary forms, which ‘simultaneously order[ed] objects for public inspection and order[ed] the public that inspected’, were brought together in London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, held in Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace. Fears that admitting unlimited numbers of the ‘labouring classes’ to the exposition would result in unruliness, disorder, or even rioting proved to be unfounded; as Bennett writes the public proved ‘duly appreciative, decorous in its bearing and entirely a-political. More than that, the exhibition transformed the many-headed mob into an ordered crowd, a part of the spectacle and a sight of pleasure in itself.’

Thus in Bennett’s conception the Crystal Palace functioned in a manner analogous to Foucault’s ‘carceral archipelago’ of disciplinary institutions including the asylum, school, and prison, by ‘reversing the panoptical principle’ and privileging spectacle rather than surveillance.

The expositions, and by extension the modern, public museum, are ‘cultural technologies' which act to 'organize a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry' whereby society 'watches over' itself. In the exposition of 1851, furthermore, Bennett reads the disordered 'fair-zones' that arose outside the boundaries of the exposition as an emblem of its other, of its exclusions and denials - of freak shows, commercial stalls and the pursuit of unedifying entertainment. The logic of the Wunderkammer, with its pursuit of the unique and singular object, lived on not within the exposition itself but in the unruly burlesque of these carnivals. Bennett writes that ‘it was here that two cultures abutted on to one another, the fair-zones providing a kind of buffer region between the official and the popular culture with the former seeking to reach into the latter and moderate it.'

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53 Bennett, ‘The Exhibitionary Complex’, p. 76.
54 Bennett, ‘The Exhibitionary Complex’, p. 86.
The intentions of the Great Exhibitions were encyclopaedic: to ‘make the whole world, past and present, metonymically available in the assemblages of objects and peoples they brought together’, and to provide mastery over the world by rendering it all visible in one place at one time. The museum in this mode was a utopian vision of the world in microcosm, a collection of fragments that stood for an ordered, productive whole. Difference and heterogeneity were collapsed, the aberrant was excluded, order reigned supreme over chaos, and eternal progress in human scientific, technological and aesthetic spheres was both goal and reward. The educational function of this museum required that it be truly public, 'democratically' accessible to all, and thus it completes Crook’s formulation with which I began here – the modern museum as ‘product of Renaissance humanism, eighteenth-century enlightenment and nineteenth-century democracy’.55 None of these three constitutive elements have remained unchallenged or unchanged, however, as the museum has continued to develop from its classical modern to its late modern or postmodern phases. The ways that this quintessentially modern institution emerged, both directly and indirectly, from its medieval, Renaissance, and enlightenment predecessors has been the subject of this first half of the chapter.

So the thesis has shown that the transition from the pre-modern Wunderkammer to the modern museum presents a particular historical crux, a moment that illustrates the impossibility of a continuous history for the museum unless it is conceived as a history of collecting. The transition from modern to postmodern modes of the museum presents another turning point, but for different reasons. At this point, for the first time, the emphasis shifted from museum objects to museum subjects, from object to experience. The question is thus not only how the postmodern museum differs from the modern institution, but also whether it can still be described as a museum at all. Whether the history of the museum has been continuous or spasmodic, whether it is defined as a history of objects and collections or as a history of systems of order, the very definition of what a museum is, what it does, and why, reached another historical crux at the threshold of

55 Crook, The British Museum, p. 32
postmodernism. This question will be further examined in the next chapter. But first it will be necessary to review the literature and theory of the ‘new museology’.

PART TWO: MUSEUM LITERATURE AND THE ‘NEW MUSEOLOGY’

The critique of the museum institution inaugurated by what might be called critical postmodernism has seen a new approach to the processes and practices of museology, which has been reflected in an explosion of museum literature. This critique is defined strongly enough to be identified as a ‘movement’, and has been described as the ‘new museology’. The literature of the new museology works to foster a self-reflexive, critical culture in museums, a continual examination of how the apparatus works, an exposure of its ideological postures and political complicities. It is to this literature that the thesis will now turn in more depth. The intention in this second part of the chapter is to work through a general overview of recent museum literature, identifying trends, naming significant authorities, and pointing out patterns in this discourse. It also includes general observations on the changing nature of the museum itself, the ways in which it has been affected and changed by the discourse of critical museology, and its possible directions in the future.

But first a note upon the idea of museology as a critical discourse. In the introduction to his seminal work on French collective history, *Les Lieux de Memoire*, Pierre Nora observes the influence that the rise of historiography has had on history as a discourse. This is to some extent analogous to the effect of museology on museums. Nora notes that the French language makes no distinction between ‘history’ as real lived events, and ‘history’ as ‘the intellectual operation that renders [these lived events] intelligible’. While this may be read as a ‘weakness’ in the language, a weakness that is incidentally shared with English, it also implies that the two are animated by the same impulse, that ‘the process that

58 But not with German, where the distinction between the two is marked with the designations *Geschichte* and *Histoire* respectively. Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p.8.
is carrying us forward and our representation of that process are of the same kind. The idea that there may be a fault line between them is marked only tangentially, in both French and English, by the separation of history from memory. Nora's thesis is that the modern period has driven a wedge between these two, and this separation is caused, in part, by the rise of a 'historiographical consciousness', that is to say a history of history. Historiography is the discourse of history turned back upon itself, become self reflexive and critical, aware of its own exclusions and mythologies; it increases the distance between history and memory by introducing doubt. Nora writes that

To interrogate a tradition, venerable though it may be, is no longer to pass it on intact... By questioning its own traditional structure, its own conceptual and material resources, its operating procedures and social means of distribution, the entire discipline of history has entered its historiographical age, consummating its dissociation from memory.

Nora's thesis is relevant here not only because of the museum's role as an instrument of historical discourse, which is therefore influenced by historiography's critical turn, but because the rise of museology marks a similarly self-reflexive turn in the discourse of museums. Thus the notion of a 'critical museology' can be argued to be something of a tautology - museology is critical by definition, since it is engaged not with the primary historical material of objects and evidence, but with the secondary level of discourse. Nevertheless I use the term here to distinguish between essentially uncritical works on practical matters such as conservation, object registration, security and the like, and more theoretically orientated works which examine the ideological and epistemological underpinnings of the museum apparatus. The same distinction could be made using the terms museology and museography, which describe, respectively, the theory and practice of museums. While it would be a mistake to make a rigid distinction between these, this thesis is more concerned with the literature of museology, and particularly with its critical approach.

Just as the late twentieth century saw an exponential growth in the number and prestige of new museums being constructed all over the world, there was a

59 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 8.
60 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 9.
corresponding boom in museum literature. Practical museographic works - handbooks on museum planning and operation, guides for curators, conservators, and exhibition designers, works on interactivity and multimedia interfaces, and texts on visitor surveys and evaluation - have been complimented by a growing critical literature. Museums seem to have achieved, or at least are striving to achieve, a new self-reflexivity, a self-critical, de-mythifying practice explicitly dedicated to undoing some of the ideologies and exclusivities that were so characteristic of the institution in its nineteenth and early twentieth-century guises. This is not only apparent in, but actually driven by the discourse of critical museology; the old divide, even animosity, between museum theory and practice is steadily being bridged. Critical museum studies is now sufficiently established as a discipline that recent years have seen the publication of texts about the discourse of museology itself.

Museums have never been as popular as they are now, neither with the public nor with critics, cultural commentators or politicians, and to a certain extent the growth in museum literature can be attributed to this. The museum's newfound status as mass media educational and entertainment tool, a venue for a kind of generalised, edifying 'cultural experience', is still, however, stridently criticised in some quarters. There remains a division between those who see the museum's primary purpose as being an archive for the collection and preservation of objects, and those who see it as a vehicle for communicating knowledge to people. Kevin Moore has produced a good overview of the ways in which these issues have been


debated by museum professional, drawing in turn on work by Michael Ettema. Ettema sees a distinction between a formalist model of material culture analysis, where the object is seen to ‘speak for itself’, and an analytical model: ‘the insurgent analytical model attempts to teach not just what happened, but how and why it happened. It necessarily emphasises abstract explanations for the concrete events of history... collections are tools for teaching a more general history that focuses on the dynamics of past societies... Objects are the props, not the message.' In general terms, then, the formalist model would have it that objects are the main point of museums, while the analytical model would lean towards people as the museum’s raison d’etre. Needless to say it is this second group that has grasped the rhetoric of interactivity and new media technology most enthusiastically. The division can be characterised in very broad terms as one of emphasis - one concentrating on objects, the other on human subjects.

**DUMB THINGS OR ELOQUENT ARTEFACTS? MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE STATUS OF THE MUSEUM OBJECT**

The question of the status of the museum object, long a problem for art theorists, has, in this age of spectacle, simulation, and rapidly developing digital image technologies, extended to historical artefacts. This debate has a history which can be traced back (amongst other things) to Andre Malraux’s concept of the ‘Museum Without Walls’, an encyclopaedic compilation of photographs, of art in all forms and

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65 Ettema, ‘History museums and the culture of Materialism’, pp. 63-64.


from all times, published in book form. Malraux's idea was that this would allow artworks that were isolated in space and time to be compared on a scale of absolute value. Digital technologies have made the realisation of this same idea much easier and more accessible via the internet, which could be said to have become the true 'museum without walls'. But the questions remain multiple: is the authentic object expendable, or necessary to meaningful museum experience? Exactly what is the affect that artefacts have on museum visitors, and how does this differ from the relationship of objects and people in the outside world? What bearing does museum 'interactivity' have on the equation? And exactly how do objects 'communicate' or 'teach' in museums: do they 'speak'? Or are they mute? On a larger scale, is the museum's very claim to 'authenticity' underpinned by authentic objects, such that a museum with no such objects would, by definition, no longer be a museum? These questions hold considerable weight, and are points of continuing debate.

The discourse around the status of the museum object is partly informed by a considerable literature on the analysis or 'reading' of material culture, which borders and in several places overlaps critical museum discourse. Originating in a range of disciplines, from archaeology through anthropology, from cultural studies analyses of popular culture to the 'object-centred' disciplines of art history and criticism, this discourse has been marked by some highly original, interdisciplinary

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66 See Andre Malraux, The Museum Without Walls, Secker & Warburg, London, 1954. Another project like this was Aby Warburg's institute and library, although this was intended as an total genealogy of symbols and themes in art, rather than a plane of values.


70 For an insightful overview of questions of authenticity and affect in museum objects, see Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine eds., Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, ed., Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1991, especially Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder', pp. 42-56, and Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, 'Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue', pp. 159-175. On the question of whether objects 'speak', Crew and Sims are unequivocal: 'The problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie.' (p. 159)


works. While semiotic and structuralist analysis has been influential in providing a model for ‘reading’ objects, the discourse is not limited to semiotics. In this discourse artefacts have been examined as spoils, \textit{momento mori}, fetish objects, fragments, mnemonic devices, and souvenirs; they have been examined in the context of private collections, as a reflection of individual subjectivity and means of warding off anxiety, as psychoanalytic indicators, \textit{alter egos}, and markers of sociological identity. Many of these analyses are underpinned by the question of whether meaning is \textit{inherent}, lying hidden within objects, waiting to be deciphered, or whether it lies \textit{outside} the object and is provided by people, through interpretation and display. Ettema writes that the notion that objects ‘expressed the spirit of the people who made and used them’, and were thus reifications of abstract moral and spiritual characteristics, was fundamental to early museums. This ‘formalist’ perspective, associated with the museum’s early history and educative function, has tended to give way in recent

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item See for example Edwina Taborsky, ‘The Discursive Object’ in \textit{Objects of Knowledge}, ed Susan Pearce, Athlone Press, London, 1990, pp. 50-77. Taborsky and Pearce are influenced by, amongst others, the semiotic works of Umberto Eco, C.S. Pierce, and M. Bakhtin.
\item Ettema, ‘History museums and the culture of Materialism’, p. 66.
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years to an 'analytical' model, whereby objects are seen to not be inherently meaningful in themselves, but able to stand for certain ideas when placed in a network of interpretation. This latter idea is the basis for a new conception of the museum as 'interpretative centre' or as a more generalised 'cultural centre'. In its most extreme forms it also marks a shift in emphasis from authentic objects to authentic experience. Lisa C. Roberts, one of the few museum theorists who have actually systematically examined what 'authentic experience' might be, draws on the work of Miles Orvell to propose a shift towards a 'culture of authenticity' in the early twentieth century, a shift that mitigated the apparent 'inauthenticity' of modern existence. At this time experience began to be discussed as a measure of access to the 'real'. This is counterpoint to a parallel contemporary discourse on simulation and the 'absolute fake', centering upon cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco. Artefacts, conceived as 'sites of experience', increasingly seem replaceable with replicas, representations, or interactive interfaces.

Interactivity itself is a key term in current museological theory, practice, and debate, despite its rather ill defined terms. Amongst other things it is enthusiastically embraced as a symbol of accessibility and populism, and I will have cause to return to this later in the dissertation in the analysis of the two case study museums. But in fact ‘interactivity’ encompasses a huge range of possible subject-object interactions, from the ability simply to touch and hold museum specimens, to ‘push-button’ interactive exhibits (particularly prevalent in science and technology museums), to sophisticated computer interfaces, to the ‘interaction’ between a viewer and an artwork. The term has come to stand for any mode of

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85 Hilde Hein, 'Museums: From Object to Experience', in Carolyn Korsmeyer ed., Aesthetics: The Big Questions, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, pp. 103-115, quote from p. 106. Hein gives the example of dinosaur exhibitions, where computer animation and Jurassic Park style modelling have been more effective in satisfying the public than laboriously preserved 'real' paleobiological specimens.
museum display that departs from the glass-case-on-a-pedestal model, which engages the senses more than through sight alone, or which provokes some emotional, intellectual, or even physiological response in the beholder. Interactivity is seen to be particularly attractive to children, and an invaluable aid to the museum as an educational device.

All of this reopens the question that animates this chapter of the dissertation, a question about the philosophical base of museums, and whether it lies in the material, in objects and collections as such, or whether it is conceptual and immaterial - in other words whether the museum’s real object is things or ideas. This distinction is more than simply a question of historical veracity - it is significant because of the completely different, even mutually exclusive meaning that the two approaches ascribe to individual artefacts. Where objects in a Wunderkammer or personal collection may stand only for themselves, things chosen to represent one part of an overriding conceptual model are valued more as evidence supporting that model than as objects in their own right. The political connotations of this are also significant - a group of objects is not in itself political. Only when it represents some kind of message, narrative, belief, or epistemology does a collection come to be interlaced with ideology.

POLITICAL ANALYSIS, TRUTHS AND FICTIONS

The museum institution has survived the first wave of political analysis that, following the lead of postcolonial and feminist discourse, painted it as an inherently authoritarian, patriarchal structure that reinforced class divisions, excluded minorities of all kinds, valorised a Eurocentric, racist notion of technological and

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cultural progress, deliberately disguised these ideologies as universal fact, and, in short, maintained a hegemony over authenticity, knowledge, and the 'truth' about the world. This broadly post-modern position sought to demonstrate that the museum, far from being anchored by certain inalienable truths, was itself a representation based on a series of narratives or 'fictions'. As Eugene Donato writes,

The set of objects the museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a non-linguistic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world. Should the fiction disappear, there is nothing left of the Museum but "bric-a-brac," a heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects...

As the museum has slowly worked to address such concepts, the discourse of critical museology has shifted from the first wave of political critique towards an examination of the implicit workings of power in the museum. This has had the effect of drawing closer scrutiny to both the 'micro' scale of museum representation - the individual exhibition, and its minutiae of object placement, case, plinth, or diorama, labelling, lighting, juxtaposition and so forth - and the 'macro' scale, the ways in which the museum is used or assumed to represent a culture, state, or nation as a whole. The theoretical approach has also taken several paths. One

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88 See the quote from Sharon Macdonald and Roger Silverstone at the head of this chapter. The museum has also been deeply influenced by the strand of 'post-modernist historiography' that sees history itself as text, a loose and essentially arbitrarily chosen collection of narratives or stories. See Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987.


91 The Smithsonian Institution in the United States is a centre for research in this area. See Karp and Lavine eds., Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, and Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine eds., Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington,
branch has drawn on the work of Michel Foucault to undertake an analysis of the museum as a 'disciplinary' institution engaged in social control and the constitution of a 'public' made up of 'citizens'. By examining the composition, behaviour, and attitudes of the museum-going populace, critics such as Tony Bennett, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, and Carol Duncan have identified museum visiting, especially of art museums, as a class-specific 'ritual', which reinforces an established status quo. The notion of the museum having an intangible 'civilising' or 'improving' effect on its public is as old as the institution itself, but in Duncan's accounts museum visiting is much more complex than a simple transaction whereby the populace passes through the institution and emerges 'bettered'.

Duncan makes a reading of the museum as a ritual or 'liminal' space where boundaries between sacred and secular are far from clear. In her account museums, like churches and temples in ages past, are constructed as microcosms of the universe, 'sites that publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual's place within it.' She identifies the exclusionary nature of the museum ritual, and draws a connection between museum visiting and social status, whereby '[t]hose who are best prepared to perform its ritual - those who are most able to respond to its various cues - are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, or ethnic) the museum ritual most fully confirms.' This branch of critique is also distinguished by its emphasis on spatial analysis, the role of museum space (and space defining elements such as architecture and exhibition design) in orchestrating the experience and behaviour of the museum visitor, both to reinforce a certain narrative or message and to enforce


a particular strategy of surveillance, of seeing and being seen. In their seminal analysis of the art-historical evolution implied by the procession of spaces and artworks in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Duncan and Wallach also emphasise the particular mode of behaviour it produces,

In MOMA you wind through a series of narrow, silent, windowless white spaces. These rooms have a peculiar effect. They inhibit speech: if you speak at all, you speak in low tones and only to those who have come with you. This is an intensely private place. You move silently over carpeted floors and between featureless, luminous walls, insubstantial by comparison with the works of art they support. You are in a "nowhere," a pristine blankness, a sunless white womb/tomb, seemingly outside time and history. Here, as in most labyrinths, the substance of the ritual is an internal drama.

This discourse on museum behaviour also overlaps with the new 'science' of visitor surveys, a body of empirical research that seeks to examine exactly which sectors of society visits museums and why, and by extension, to examine why other demographic groups do not. With its emphasis on the expectations and experience of museum visitors, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel pioneered this branch of critical museology in their groundbreaking sociological study, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Publics*, first published in Paris in 1969.

The museum conceived as an instrument for the exercise of power also opens questions of the politics of identity - who has the right to represent whom, and how. This has important implications at a range of scales, from the ways that the subjectivity and citizenship of the individual is constructed, through the representation of particular social or ethnic groups, to the expression and

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representation of nation and state. Much of the critique has centred around the ways in which minority groups have been (or have failed to be) represented in museums, and the ways in which museums have represented the people of different times and places as 'other'; "[e]ven though museums may aim to be cross-cultural in scope and to challenge ethnocentrism, they are also arenas in which one culture displays another. The power to display another, as 'other', is considerable." There has also been an important critique of the place of museums - especially art museums - in creating and reinforcing national identity. Susan Pearce puts this very well when she writes that

\[\text{\textit{[t]he public art museum makes the nation a visible reality, and the visiting public are addressed as citizens who have a share in the nation. The museum displays spiritual wealth that is owned by the state and shared by all who belong to the state. The political abstraction is given symbolic form in the shape of tangible 'masterpieces', which exhibit humanity at its best and highest, so identifying the state with these spiritual values and sharing them with all comers. The museum is the place where, in exchange for his share in the state's spiritual holdings, the individual affirms his attachment to the state. This is why the creation of national museums was a matter of concern at the highest political levels, and why, from Napoleon to Göring, pictures are politics.}}\]

Art museums in particular have an important role in associating a nation with values such as Western democracy, liberalism, and modernity. As Duncan writes, 'as much as ever, having a bigger and better art museum is a sign of political virtue and national identity - of being recognizably a member of the civilized community of modern, liberal nations.' More than this, such a verisimilitude is also a tool for political legitimation, and Duncan’s reference to 'political virtue' is loaded. She also writes that

\[\text{\footnotesize 101 The discourse also addresses the ways in which 'citizens' both constitute and are constituted by the 'state'. '... the museum is the site of a symbolic transaction between the visitor and the state. In exchange for the state's spiritual wealth, the individual intensifies his attachment to the state. Hence the museum's hegemonic function, the crucial role it can play in the experience of citizenship.' Duncan and Wallach, 'The Universal Survey Museum', p. 457.}
\[\text{\footnotesize 103 Susan Pearce, \textit{Museums, Objects and Collections: a Cultural Study}, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1992, p. 100.}
\[\text{\footnotesize 104 Duncan, 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', p. 89.} \]
[l]ately, both traditional monarchs in so-called underdeveloped nations and Third World military despot have become enthralled with [art museums]. Western-style art museums are now deployed as a means of signalling to the West that one is a reliable political ally, imbued with proper respect for and adherence to Western symbols and values. By providing a veneer of Western liberalism that entails few political risks and relatively small expense, art museums in the Third World can reassure the West that one is a safe bet for economic or military aid.103

The idea of the museum as a representation of nation and culture, which has led to comparisons with the world expositions of the nineteenth century, also has significant implications for the museum as a tourist destination. Museums operate as 'surrogates for travel', offering locals a kind of 'journey' to other places or to the past, but equally they are important tourist destinations.106 This has been reinforced in recent years by museum buildings which are themselves world famous attractions, and which offer a new cohesion between the building as spectacle and advertisement, the 'blockbuster exhibition', and the sale of museum merchandise.107 Counterpart to this is a conception of the museum as theme park, where entertainment and immersive 'experience' are paramount; as Barbara Hershenblatt-Gimblett notes, the term 'experience', taken to mean 'an engagement of the senses, emotions, and imagination,' has become ubiquitous in both tourism and museum marketing.108 The rise of the concept of 'heritage' - the notion that a place can be a kind of in-situ 'museum of itself' - and the relationship between the museum, tourist, and heritage industries, is also an important area of criticism and analysis; '[h]eritage and tourism are collaborative industries, heritage converting locations into destinations and tourism making them economically viable as exhibits of themselves. Locations become museums of themselves within a tourism economy.'109 Here Donald Horne’s idea that tourism is a form of

107 Once again, Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is the most stunning recent example of this, but there will surely be others. See for example Peter Hyatt, ‘Museums of Desire’, in Museum National vol. 8, no. 2, Nov-Dec 1999, pp 4-5.
109 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, p. 151.
appropriation and acquisition, that a tourist buys experiences then uses images and objects to 'prove' that they happened, finds resonance in Susan Stewart's notion of the souvenir as a fundamentally nostalgic sign of the hopeless incommensurability between experience and representation.\(^{110}\)

**CONTESTED HISTORIES, CRITICAL MUSEUMS**

Throughout their history, museums have been used to legitimise the rule of some despotic, even genocidal political regimes. In some accounts, the museum itself is seen as inherently authoritarian, the inheritor of an enlightenment rationality that ultimately led to the horrors of the Holocaust and other subsequent cases of 'ethnic cleansing'. The ways in which museums represent such tragic and abhorrent histories is itself a growing area of research. Holocaust historiography and the literature of Holocaust museums, for instance, is a discipline of its own.\(^{111}\) The fact that this branch of criticism is rapidly growing is not only a function of the unabated continuation of atrocities throughout the world, but also the museum's increasing willingness to address contested or unpresentable histories.

The key point here is criticality: the museum has long been a symbol of establishment values, both literally and metaphorically a conservative, backward-looking institution. Criticism, whether of its own exhibitionary and historiographic processes or of world events themselves, has traditionally not been its purpose, since the museum has presented itself as a neutral and objective presentation of history and the world. But critical museology has shown this claim to neutrality to be itself a mythology, and the museum has been called upon to redress some of its past wrongs. This has partly been manifest in practical ways - the repatriation of

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human remains and sacred objects to the groups from which they were collected
as ethnographic specimens is a case in point.\textsuperscript{112} It has also produced some
spectacular controversies - including the ongoing debate as to whether the
Parthenon Marbles collected by Lord Elgin and housed in the British Museum
should be returned to Greece, and the controversy over the exhibition of the 'Enola
Gay' at the U.S. National Air and Space Museum.\textsuperscript{113} This last controversy has been
described by Steven Dubin as 'an arena where the "victory culture" of an ingenuous
older generation collided head-on with cheeky postmodernism.'\textsuperscript{114} Recent years
have seen so-called 'Culture Wars', 'History Wars' and 'Science Wars' all played
out in museums, and these have been succinctly summarised by Sharon
Macdonald:

The 'Culture Wars' have focussed especially on issues of 'political
correctness' and 'intrinsic value' in relation to the literary and artistic canon;
the 'History Wars' on similar issues in relation to history, multiculturalism
and national identity, focussed particularly on the Enola Gay episode; and
the 'Science Wars' have seen fierce debate over the epistemological status
of science.\textsuperscript{115}

As Dubin writes, 'Museums... no longer merely provide a pleasant refuge from
ordinary life, nor are they simply repositories of received wisdom. Museums have
moved to the forefront in struggles over representation and over the chronicling,
revising, and displaying of the past.'\textsuperscript{116} Critical museology has forced museums, if

\textsuperscript{112} See Moira G. Simpson, Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era,
Routledge, London and New York, 1996, especially part three, 'Human remains and cultural
property: the politics of control', pp. 171-246.

\textsuperscript{113} These debates are also interesting because they open questions of authenticity – neither
the British Museum nor the Greek Museum community, nor either of their publics, would be
satisfied with a replica of the Parthenon marbles. In many ways this is the flip side of the
controversy – it is not only about wanting the original, but about not wanting the simulacra.

\textsuperscript{114} Steven Dubin, Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum, New

\textsuperscript{115} Sharon Macdonald, 'Exhibitions of power and powers of exhibition: an introduction to the
politics of display,' in The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture, ed. Sharon

\textsuperscript{116} Dubin, Displays of Power, p. 5.
not to take a critical stance, at least to offer a 'balanced' representation of often conflicting interpretations of traumatic events.\textsuperscript{117}

More than making a bald representation of the facts of difficult or tragic histories such as those of war and genocide, in cases such as these the museum often takes on a memorial or monumental role as well. The entanglements this entails between personal memory, cultural memory, and historical occurrence are complex and worthy of further examination.\textsuperscript{118} Of course, even in its less emotionally loaded manifestations, the museum has an implicit connection to both private and collective memory, whether it balances authoritative history and 'subjective' personal memory or frames them in opposition. Gaynor Kavanagh, for instance, discusses the museum as a 'dream space' that provokes imagination and personal memory, while making it clear that memory itself is a construction that can be both 'faulty and flawed'. She argues the importance of oral history and first-hand accounts as a kind of corrective or counterpart to official history, advocating a certain productive clash between the two.\textsuperscript{119} Sheldon Annis has also theorised the division of museums into three types of 'symbolic space'. According to his formulation the museum comprises intellectual, contemplative 'cognitive space', interactive 'social space', and 'dream space', a space of imagination that 'allows for lateral and creative thinking, for problem-solving and leaps of fantasy.' He continues, '[dream space] can open up feelings and thoughts long buried. It can lift the lid on our memories.'\textsuperscript{120}

Andreas Huyssen has argued that the museum boom of the late twentieth century does not mark remembrance, but rather a crisis of memory, a leaning


\textsuperscript{118} This work has been admirably begun by James Young. See his \textit{The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning}, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993.


towards amnesia and oblivion, a desire to forget.\textsuperscript{121} The museum in this conception is a monument to a society sunken deep into amnesia, a society that worships fleeting, transient experience, and uses monuments and museums to undertake the collective ‘work’ of memory that in earlier times was performed and enacted by traditional social groupings. Such a position is also taken by Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, who in the introduction to a 1989 special edition of the journal \textit{Representations} on ‘Memory and Counter-Memory’, identified two sharply opposed attitudes about the past that seemed to them to arise consistently together. ‘Hardly for the first time, but, so it seemed, with particular urgency, talk about “our” cultural amnesia was tied to a fascination, even obsession, with historical memory.’\textsuperscript{122}

Huyssen follows the same general trajectory as Davis and Starn, and also Pierre Nora, who writes that ‘there are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory.’\textsuperscript{123} The recent flurry of publications which deal with the ways in which museums interrelate with memory, both individual and collective, would seem symptomatic of the ‘crisis of memory’ that Huyssen and Nora propose.\textsuperscript{124} Other texts, from disciplines bordering on museology, have made similar connections based on different case study ‘sites’, drawing more general conclusions about the relationship between history and memory,\textsuperscript{125} monuments and memory,\textsuperscript{126} and memory and the city\textsuperscript{127} in the modern era.

\textsuperscript{123} In Nora’s melancholy account, history and memory are now fundamentally opposed, ‘[h]istory is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.’ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 9.
The connection between museums and memory also crosses questions of monumentality, which is, of course, also an architectural issue. A museum is an object - a museum building - as well as being an organisation, and such buildings operate as important symbols and representations of the wider museum institution. Purpose-built museums are amongst the most complex and prestigious public buildings being constructed today, and in recent years have come to be something of a forum for virtuoso or 'signature' architecture. The notion that art museums, in particular, allow the architect greater latitude than is available in more prosaic commissions, that they are a kind of 'playground' for invention and avant-gardeism, has been stated by Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani; 'contemporary museum buildings tend to be astonishingly pure materializations of their authors' corresponding attitudes towards architecture: they are seismographs of the architectonic culture to which they belong'. The idea that the art museum calls for an exalted and 'art like' form is summed up in the notion of the museum as 'secular cathedral'. Of course, ideologies of art as religion can (although they do not necessarily) entail a whole pseudo-mystical mythology that, as Paul Finch ironically points out, is imbued at every level with commodification,

Pilgrims gather at the shrine of St Cezanne, St Degas, St Rothko. Indulgences are purchased from the inevitable shops in the nave of the National Gallery, the Tate, the Victoria & Albert. Catalogues are bought instead of candles. ... There are prophets and heretics, visionaries and pariahists, the money changers are not turned out of the temple however, but ushered in to provide matching funding for the next lottery bid...

The idea of the art museum as secular cathedral also opens a series of specifically architectural questions, which have engaged considerable debate about the apparent struggle for precedence that this entails between art and architecture.


Some museum buildings have become internationally famous, appearing in the popular as well as the architectural press, and giving rise to a range of monographic works on individual museum buildings and their architects. A spate of glossy, large format publications showcasing surveys or selections of the newest, most architecturally adventurous museums have also appeared. In the same category as special exhibition catalogues, some of these publications have been markedly uncritical and descriptive in their approach, often bordering on so-called ‘architectural porn’. But other architectural forums have made a serious examination of the role of architecture in framing, representing, and marketing the museum, and the ways in which museum architecture can respond to the changing nature and role of the institution. I will have cause to return to such ideas and analyses later in the dissertation.

Representation, Narrative, and Relativity in the Postmodern Museum

It has been noted in recent years that museums are becoming 'Balkanised', breaking into ever more specific areas of specialisation, perhaps as a result of critiques directed at the 19th century encyclopaedic, 'universal survey museum'


model. 134 A similar process has occurred within the ranks of museum practitioners, with the increasing professionalisation and specialisation of museum staff. This reduction in scope of museum subject and contents finds a parallel in a new emphasis on the 'retelling' of history as multiplicity, a myriad of individual accounts and oral histories not taking over from, but at least supplementing a single 'master narrative' history. Indeed, the very notion of history as narrative, as a story which is constructed from selected historical evidence and then retold by the museum, is a new acknowledgement that the museum does not have a privileged or unmediated access to history, but is itself a representation.

The museum traditionally presented itself not a representation, but a pure presentation of verifiable, objective truth; it was thought to exist as a window to authenticity, offering transparent access to the factual and objective real. In the secular, post-enlightenment age this version of truth took on the power of an absolute - true at all times, to all people, and in every circumstance, it overtook earlier concepts of religious truth, which were then reduced to the subjective realm of personal belief. The notion of the museum as a form or medium for representation thus marks a significant departure for the institution, since it has long been expected not only to know, but also to share, the truth about the world and its history. In the new museology it may still be framed as a realist representation, but even this admits the possibility of bias, relativity, and error; given that realism is separated from the real by the gap of representation.

The body of criticism which has accused the museum of making invalid, and indeed impossible claims to absolute truth can be grouped under the general heading of critical postmodernism. 135 Such accounts generally set out to demonstrate that in its dedication to proving and representing certain modernist 'metanarratives', which include the doctrine of progress, a certain transcendent understanding of art and art history, and the primacy of rationality, the museum is

134 See Duncan and Wallach, 'The Universal Survey Museum', pp. 448-469.
central to the modern understanding of the world.\textsuperscript{136} After having thus demonstrated the museum to be centred upon absolute values and absolute truths, these critiques then set out to demonstrate the impossibility of such objectivity. In the belief that the museum was based upon a number of unsupportable mythologies, and that these myths need only to be exposed to lose their power, these postmodernist accounts frequently declared the museum a doomed, or 'ruined' institution.\textsuperscript{137}

The fact that museums have not only endured this critique, but have flourished in its wake is instructive, since it reveals as much about what the museum-going public expects and wants from museums as it does about the museum itself. The museum is not ruined, it is more successful, prestigious, and popular than ever before. Critical postmodernism demanded that the museum become an institution that posed questions rather than providing answers, but this has itself been a source of public consternation. It seems that there is sufficient relativism and uncertainty in the world itself for the museum to be regarded as a kind of antidote, trusted as a stronghold or bastion of supposed absolutes: history, beauty, and truth. All this is not to say that the populace is retrograde for clutching after a few last certainties in a secular world, but rather that modernism itself was central to the museum, just as the museum was fundamental to modernism. And just as this relationship is not easily disentangled, the modernist worldview has been shown to be more enduring than expected.


CHAPTER TWO
A Critical History of the Museum / A History of Museum Criticism

FIGURE 4: The Louvre, Paris, (top) the Pompidou Centre, Paris (middle) and the Tate Modern, London (bottom). The art museum as tourist destination.
ART MUSEUMS: FRAMING AND DEFINING ART

Of all museums, art museums have long been regarded as the most rarefied, prestigious bastions of high-culture, and have been fiercely criticised for excluding and marginalising all but a cultural 'elite'. In spite of this, the art museum seems surprisingly unmoved by the general trend towards populism, education and entertainment that has been so marked in other types of museum towards the end of the millennium. In contrast to other types, art museums seem to have been largely insulated from functional, if not economic analysis.\(^\text{138}\) Also in contrast to other types, the art museum holds fast to the primacy of the authentic, aauratic object, which means it is inclined away from the general trend to 'theme park' or 'interpretative centre' models. While many of the criticisms made about other museums also apply to art museums, the stakes are higher there because of certain entrenched ideologies about the role and status of art. These include the romantic notion that art objects 'transcend' the material and social world, and must not only be revered above all other artefacts, but separated, protected, and 'elevated' into the realm of the museum. Such unstated ideologies underscore the very existence of art museums.

The art museum as an institutional 'frame' is held, by many critics, to produce a particular mode of apprehension or 'way of seeing' art.\(^\text{139}\) For many, the museum apparatus interferes in the ideal, unmediated relationship between the human subject and the art object. This has led successive waves of avant-garde artists to attempt to flee the physical and ideological confines of the museum, to make art that can not be 'musiefied'. This has included the rise of a genre of critical art practice known as institutional critique, particularly associated with artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Fred Wilson, who have

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\(^{138}\) There is a whole stream of (Marxist) museum criticism committed to demonstrating the hidden but pervasive commodification of art in the 'museum industry'. See for example Rosalind Krauss, 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum', in *October*, vol. 54, 1990, pp. 3-17, which in turn draws on Frederic Jameson's 'Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *New Left Review*, no. 146, July-August 1984, pp. 53-93. See also Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, in particular the introductory essay, ‘Photographs at the End of Modernism’, pp. 2-42.

worked from within the institution to expose the ways in which museums define and constitute art and knowledge as such. The thesis will return to examining this genre in depth later, but it is enough here to say that critics of art museums argue that they both encourage the production of certain types of 'museum art', and relentlessly absorb the iconoclastic, rebellious adventures of the avant-garde into a neutralised art historical progression. Furthermore, the art museum is criticised not only for its complicity, but also for disguising this complicity, in manipulating the art market and constituting art as a commodity. This discourse is marked throughout by a critique of the museum’s decontextualisation of art, and is fired by the notion that separating an art object from its place in the world robs it of its moral and social role, and thus corrupts its true purpose.

CONCLUSIONS: CONTEXT, DEMOCRACY AND POPULARITY

This second section of the chapter has offered an overview of ideas and trends in the critical literature of contemporary museums and museology. Observing the unprecedented growth and popularity of the museum in the late twentieth century, it has questioned the ways in which the institution has diverged from its high modernist roots, and to what extent this is attributable to the discourse of the new museology. Reflecting on some of the epistemological oppositions at play within the museum - the dialectics between museum object and museum subject, object and experience, material objects and immaterial ordering systems, and private and public collections – it has noted the influence of new media technology, material culture studies, and concepts of 'interactivity' on the changing status of the museum object. On a larger scale, this section has examined the politics of identity, the ways in which museums have assumed the right and prerogative to represent some cultures and societies as 'other', while supporting mythologies of nationhood,

140 The work of these artists and this genre has been publicised and analysed particularly by critics and theorists writing in the American journal October. See for example the special edition of October dedicated to the work of Marcel Broodthaers, vol. 42, Fall 1987; Daniel Buren, 'Function of the Museum', in Museums by Artists, ed AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1983, pp. 57-60; Frazer Ward, 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', October, vol. 73, Summer 1995, pp. 71-89; and Craig Owens, 'From Work to Frame, or Is There Life After "The Death of the Author"?' in Implosion: A Postmodern Perspective, ed Lars Nittve, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1988, pp. 207-212.
connoting Western liberal values, and enforcing certain ritual patterns of behaviour. Museum architecture has been found to be implicated in these processes on many levels, by playing diverse roles including those of monument, advertisement, and tourist attraction. The section ended with some of the most trenchant criticisms directed at the institution, which have centred upon the art museum and its apparent decontextualisation, reification, and commodification of art.

Before moving on to the next chapter's argument of a fundamental relationship between the museum and mortality, it is worthwhile to return one last time to the formulation with which this chapter began, that the modern museum is a product of 'Renaissance humanism, enlightenment rationality and 19th century democracy',\textsuperscript{141} in order to make some more general comments on the development of the museum in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The concept of the museum's 'democracy', in particular, seems to fall into several successive phases, and offers a point of entry to some more general observations.

As already discussed, the opening of royal collections to the public was the first step in the 'democratisation' of the museum, followed, most dramatically in the case of the Louvre, by public ownership of the museum and its contents. But much of the critical literature surrounding contemporary museums can be argued to be engaged with two further 'late stages' of museum democracy. The first of these is the democratisation of representation, where the themes, subjects, and people represented by the museum are a reflection of the diversity of society as a whole, and do not privilege any single group. The most recent and related stage would be the democratisation of accessibility, and this has several facets. On the one hand the museum's drive for increasing accessibility is informed by sociological research which moves on from simply counting museum visitors to analysing which sectors of society actually visit museums and why, or more particularly why other sectors do not. But perhaps more important is the new museum's drive to democracy in intellectual accessibility.

It is this last development that has proven problematic to some theorists, since it has been associated with the 'dumbing down' of the museum institution.

\textsuperscript{141} Crook, \textit{The British Museum}, p. 32
Criticism of commercial television, film, and indeed much of the mass media, of which the museum could now be regarded as a part, employs similar expressions, which are countered in turn with accusations of elitism. The words ‘popular’ and ‘populist’ are now weighted terms, used on the one hand as a marker of a worthy ideological program, and on the other as bitter criticisms. These questions of the popular, populism and popular culture, especially as they relate to museum ‘liveliness’ will emerge as central to the discussion of the case study museums, and I will return to them at length later in the dissertation. But in general terms the public museum, an increasingly powerful symbol of statehood and democracy, takes equal intellectual accessibility to all as more than an economic necessity; popularity becomes something of a political imperative. Combined with the notion that museums are essentially educational, this populism has emerged as a driving force in contemporary exhibition culture and policy - from the prevalence of interactive educational devices aimed at school-aged children, to the new emphasis on the museum as ‘fun-park’ or entertainment venue, and the ever-increasing number of exhibitions dedicated to ‘popular culture’.

Such a de-mystification of the museum’s structures of knowledge is surely positive, and transparency in the preparation and presentation of exhibitions can only be of benefit to museum professionals and the public alike. The institution’s acknowledgement that it too is subject to omissions, biases, even mistakes, is simply an admission of contingencies which have always been present, but have traditionally been glossed over in the interests of preserving the museum’s ‘authority’. But whether this is seen as an honourable ‘coming-clean’ or a degeneration into relativity, it is argued here that the notion of intellectual accessibility is a significant turning point for the museum institution, with important causes and far-reaching effects. Not least of these is a new emphasis on the entertainment and education of the museum visitor, rather than on the museum object. It also marks a divergence in the programs of art museums and history museums, since authentic art objects are still generally regarded as being self-contained, self-expository, and essential to aesthetic experience, while authentic historical artefacts have, in some cases, come to seem expendable, replaceable on the one hand with replicas, and on the other with interactive digital databases and multimedia installations.
The division between art museums and other genres of museum has also been widened by a swing in museological emphasis from objects in themselves to objects in context. Susan Pearce describes the most significant development in museology in the twentieth century as a shift from the nineteenth century classification of objects into ever-finer divisions, towards an interest and examination of objects in context. This has had a range of implications and effects, including a growing interest in the everyday life of ordinary people, a concern with ecology and the total environment, and the rise of folklife or social history museums. The broader community, re-valued as the context for museums themselves, has in turn become more involved in events like ‘people’s shows’, phenomenally successful in the United Kingdom, where members of local communities display their private collections in the museum context.

In many museums the shift from objects in themselves to objects in context has been registered in exhibition design and display in a general swing from the logic of the glass case to the logic of the tableau or diorama. The art museum, however, has resisted this shift, since it is based on a notion of art that insists it does not require context in order to be understood and appreciated, indeed that it is diminished by such distracting contingencies. At the very least it is held that art should not be approached primarily by means of its context. In this conception, art is defined by its detachment and its ‘autonomy’. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes, ‘the litmus test of art seems to be whether or not an object can be stripped of contingency and still hold up. The universalising rhetoric of “art,” the insistence that great works are universal, that they transcend time and space, is predicated on the irrelevance of contingency.’ In the art museum artworks are paradoxically assumed to be entirely singular and unique, whilst simultaneously standing for a category within a particular art historical taxonomy. In the art museum the object's

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'context' is not the artists studio, the circumstances of its production, or wider political, social and historical events, but art history itself.\textsuperscript{145} This was manifest plainly in modernist art museums in the apparent ‘neutrality’ of the ‘white box’ museum interior, and a particular, ‘minimalist’ installation style - the paradigm of the ‘glass case’ model.\textsuperscript{146}

It is not going too far to suggest that art museums retain an emphasis on the authentic and aural object, while other museums are replacing this with interpretation, simulation, and image.\textsuperscript{147} The thesis has already discussed the question of art as evidence of history in relation to the Museum of Sydney example at the head of this chapter, and I will have cause to return to this issue again. But let it suffice here to say that while modernist art theory suggested that art objects could be most fully appreciated in isolation from their life in the world, this was opposite to trends elsewhere in the museum, and it was the source of much criticism from artists and theorists alike.

The drive towards inclusiveness and accessibility is now ubiquitous in new history museums, as evidenced by the growth of social history museums, so called ‘ecomuseums’\textsuperscript{148} and the notion of ‘people’s history’ or ‘history from the bottom up’.\textsuperscript{149} It is hard to take issue with such admirable and idealistic intentions,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item A notable exception to this is the tradition of connosieurship. This tradition aims to bring the two spheres of aesthetic apprehension and the actual life of the object as close together as possible, whilst still retaining the distinction between them. Connoisseurship is thus exactly a relation to contingency, and this opens a larger tension that exists in 20\textsuperscript{th} century art museums between formal, art-historical interpretation, and older tradition of connoisseurship and Vasarian biography. This would also be a split between aesthetics and taste, the former having judgment in the individual subject, the latter in society. See the discussion of Walter Benjamin the collector in the following chapter.
\item See Brian O'Doherty, \textit{Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space}, Lapis Press, Santa Monica, 1986. O'Doherty is credited with having coined the term ‘white cube’ to describe such minimalist museums and their exhibition practices, and his text remains a key expression of the idea.
\item The question of absolute aesthetic value lies at the base of this division, since if all art of all times can be judged on the same scale, then historical specificity or factuality becomes irrelevant. While it might be acceptable to say that one work was more historically ‘significant’, or even ‘interesting’, this is akin to reading artworks as documents or artefacts, rather than through aesthetic judgement.
\item On the concept and philosophy of the ecomuseum, see Peter Davis, \textit{Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place}, Leicester University Press, London and New York, 1999.
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especially as they have been accompanied by a self-critical approach to the
exclusions and strategies of power that the museum has enacted in the past. What
does seem problematic, however, is the effect that these ideals have when they are
uncritically embraced. In subsequent chapters we will see that there is more at
stake here than a simple reversal of the value system that placed the museum as
the collector and keeper of 'high' culture, such that it now a facilitator of a
generalised, democratised 'cultural experience'.
CHAPTER THREE

The Dead, the Deadly and the Deathly:
Museums and the Mortification of Culture

Having lost the life of its original historical context, the historical artifact possesses the power of a specter, that is, the power of no longer fearing for its life. The deadness of the past is what shines through the museum piece. Collecting can begin only when the past assumes a collectable form: this collectable form is given by the object's uprooted abstraction from the past as well as from the present. For the museum piece stands aloof from the present. Removed from its context in the past, the object cannot settle comfortably into the present either, for if it did, there would be no use for the museum.¹

Didier Maliveau

The German word 'museal' ['museumlike'], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralisation of culture.²

Theodor Adorno

FIGURE 5: Deathliness and liveliness in museum display. Dublin Natural History Museum (above) and Te Papa, the National Museum of New Zealand, Wellington (below). Mortification and stasis meet fun and interactivity.
INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGING A MUSEO-CRITICAL ORTHODOXY

There could be nothing more commonplace than citing, in a work of museum theory and criticism, the above quotation from Theodor Adorno's essay 'Valery Proust Museum'. The time since these words were written has been a period of phenomenal growth in the number of museums constructed all over the world, and the emergence of a corresponding critical discourse. During that period, this oft-quoted passage has become the springing point of a particular discursive trajectory. With apparent inevitability, it leads to a familiar conclusion: that museums are like mausoleums, they are deathly institutions that kill objects in order to put them on display and write their histories, and most importantly, that museums are powerful and dangerous both for having this power and for using it. The critical discourse of museums that has emerged in the postmodern period has been largely built around such ideas, particularly the notion that the connection between museums and death is inherently negative, that aside from being dangerous it is also, in Adorno's words, 'unpleasant'.

This line of argument is now well worn. It has become habitual, its landmarks treated as a series of names to be dropped and famous passages to be quoted, the same thesis followed to the same predictable conclusions. This perception of the museum is reinforced in popular culture, where it is often represented as a kind of open tomb - a silent, dusty place full of abandoned oddities, home to all things morbid and moribund, and frequented by the mawkish.

My aim in this chapter is to debate the findings of this by now orthodox museo-critical position, but perhaps not the path it takes to those conclusions. If, as I will argue here, death is irreducible from the modern museum, then how is this actually made manifest? More particularly, why is this connection invariably seen as negative – could it have a kind of value or utility of its own? Could the deathliness of the museum be read as an emblem of the ancient idea of vanitas, its objects as momento mori? The phonetic, metaphorical, and literal connection between museum and mausoleum is not at issue. What is at stake is a more

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fundamental reconceptualisation of the definition and purpose of museums, one which embraces rather than rejecting their inherent deathliness.

THE MUSEUM IS DEAD; LONG LIVE THE MUSEUM

This introduction sets out to introduce an extended metaphor. Originally the phrase ('the Queen is dead; long live the Queen!) referred to the moment of transfer, when one sovereign died and sovereignty transferred instantaneously to her or his heir. The idea that sovereignty is at once innate to one person, but at the same time is uninterrupted by their death, is here employed as an analogy for the apparent transformation that the museum institution has undergone across the threshold of postmodernism. While the discourses of critical postmodernism were quick to proclaim the death of the museum, the fact that it has not disappeared but in fact increased in importance and prestige in the ensuing years, points to an interesting historical crux. Either the museum did not die at all, or its 'sovereignty' passed instantaneously to another, modified form, or it died and was subsequently 're-born'. The question of what it was exactly that postmodernism buried at the hastily convened funeral of this most central of modernist institutions is one of the questions to be examined here.

But I also use the phrase to refer to what I will argue is the fundamental deathliness of the museum in its modern incarnation. The idea that the museum is dead, that is finished, ruined, superseded and no longer viable, is quite different to the idea that the museum is deathly - that it has an inherent connection with death and mortality. It is also different from the idea that the museum is deadly – that it has the agency and the power to 'kill', an idea that I will return to in the next chapter. Now while museum critics have long conflated these three – the dead, the deathly and the deadly – I would argue that this substitution should not be automatic. If the museum is taken to be deathly, then it is possible for it to contain dead objects, to suspend time's flux in a 'dead' state, to act as a monument recalling the lives and acts of dead people, and even to 'kill' objects by decontextualising them. None of this is to say that it is also, necessarily, a dead or ruined institution, as the phenomenal proliferation of museums in the postmodern era attest. But this proliferation is itself symptomatic of larger shifts in the nature and role of the museum institution. I would argue that, generally speaking, new or
'postmodern' museums have reacted directly against the logic of deathliness, explicitly reversing it into one of liveliness, popularity, and entertainment.

There are three elements to this argument, and the chapter is loosely structured around these. In the first of them, the modern museum is conceived as a fundamentally deathly institution, a characteristic that is found to be irreducible at the level of object, subject, collection, institution and museum architecture. The intention is not only to demonstrate the depth and pervasiveness of the connection between museums and mortality using analysis and examples from the museum literature, but also to argue that it is essential to any understanding, and indeed any appreciation, of the institution. The museum's present scramble to disavow its intimate relationship with mortality, and reinvent itself so as to seem more 'lively', is not only symptomatic of a fundamental shift in the nature of the institution, but also represents, I would argue, something of a loss. Steven Dubin has recently described the museum as a 'solidification of culture', but it is also possible to extend this into an alternative possibility, of the museum as the mortification of culture. This would embody both the idea that one can only truly understand, represent and 'remember' one's culture when it has passed away, and that the museum is the one secular institution which provides a meditation, through material objects, on the mortality of the human subject, and more broadly, on the finitude of culture.

The second element of the argument is that many museums in the postmodern period have worked to actively repudiate and repress such deathly associations in favour of a rhetoric of liveliness, and an emphasis on life and experience in the present. This opposition devolves into a further series of couplets - between an emphasis on subjects as opposed to objects, authentic experience as opposed to authentic artefacts, representation opposed to presentation, and the function of educational and entertainment venue opposed to the function of archive, all of which were introduced in the previous chapter. Further to that introduction, it will be argued here that the analysis and critique enacted by postmodernism is a kind of threshold or crux in museum history. This extends the question of whether

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the museum’s history is one of continuity or rupture, a history of objects and collections or of immaterial ordering systems, and indeed whether the museum has a conceivable history at all. Such analysis positions the museum institution in the context of wider cultural shifts, and indeed posits the museum as a central ‘site’ where such shifts are manifest. It also notes a significant parallel between the ‘lively’, interactive, dematerialised museum, and the trend towards an aestheticised ‘theatricality’ that the art theorist and critic Michael Fried argues to be central to post-minimal art. This parallel is important since the terms of reference on both sides are the same – lively museums and theatrical artworks can both be identified by a particular comportment and address towards a beholder. They are also both conditioned by a problematisation of object character – of museum artefacts and artworks respectively. This apparent parallel, even convergence, between movements in museum display and in art practice has far-reaching implications, which will be discussed further in chapters to come.

Finally, the third moment of the argument seeks to move beyond oppositions between modern and postmodern, deathly and lively modes of museum, and sets out to introduce a third possibility, outside or excess to the conventional ‘frame’ of the museum. I refer to those museums that deal with genocidal, contested, or ‘impossible’ histories. Since deathliness has largely been purged from other museums in the postmodern period, the function of memorial, vehicle for communal mourning, and reflection upon mortality, which was formerly dispersed throughout all types of museum has now, I would argue, been concentrated in this specific and highly specialised type. The crisis of the museum object comes to a head in impossible history museums, given that mute physical objects are rarely adequate to the presentation of such histories.

PART ONE: MUSEUMS, DEATHLINESS, AND THE MORTIFICATION OF CULTURE

The museum is haunted, even doubled, by the figure of death. As an expression of the ideals of 18th century enlightenment, the museum’s role has traditionally been to

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reinforce the possibility of transcendence, of a ‘true’ and universal order outside of time and history. Susan Stewart has observed that all collections are self-enclosed realms that aspire to ahistoricism; ‘[t]he collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world.’ Inherent within any negation of time is a negation of death, and thus if ‘every culture mounts some symbolic effort to contradict the irreversibility of time and its end result of death’, the museum can be read as one such ritualised foil to mortality. The fact that it can only achieve this by being itself a timeless or ‘dead’ zone is one of the great paradoxes of the museum - if it kills objects, it is only to avoid their inevitable death, to control and rationalise mortality.

Of course, it must also be acknowledged that this idea of the museum as the mortification of culture has a dark side, as has been tragically demonstrated in the past. It is emphatically not my intention here to advocate the exploitation of the museum’s mortificatory effects as a strategy of domination and control, as occurred when the Nazi party collected Jewish ceremonial objects in preparation for a ‘Central Jewish Museum’ in Prague. Andrea Liss, with reference to Adorno’s essay quoted at the head of this chapter, has perceptively observed that

Adorno’s conflation of these two words [museum and mausoleum] calls attention to the deadening effect of sealing the near present into a vaulted and hermeticized past. His phrasing of the two terms also pinpoints the ethical danger of such an enterprise. That is, the ethical danger lies in exhibiting the history of a people as if that historicizing means pronouncing that culture’s death sentence. The Nazi’s Central Jewish Museum in Prague was staged precisely on celebrating the remnants of extermination, on what they willed to be the past. Their institutionalized acts of genocide were to be knowingly and coyly muted beneath the elegant display of confiscated Jewish ceremonial and domestic artefacts as precious objects – an obscene ethnographic aesthetic based on the dialectic of extermination/preservation, in which one could not exist without the other.

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8 Andrea Liss, Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p. 79. On the Nazi’s plans for the Central
This passage articulates both the historicizing power of the museum, to constitute even the present and vital as past and dead, and the potential ethical dangers of that power. But there is a crucial distinction between the Nazi’s misuse of the museum, their transformation of the museum’s deathliness into deadliness, and a concept that I am advocating here. For the Nazis the opposition was a binary one: living Jewish culture and society was to be entirely erased and displaced by a museified representation, made up of relics and remnants. The living culture and the museum representation were constructed as mutually exclusive, and the museum became a monstrous tool for an abhorrent ideological program. What I advocate here, however, is very different. It is possible to propose a nuanced, dialectical relationship, a mutual inherence between the deathliness of the museum and a continuing, living culture. This would not be a question, then, of ‘pronouncing a culture’s death sentence’, but rather of collecting and recognising those objects that, as a normal and inevitable part of time’s passage, have been set aside, lost, or forgotten. The Nazi’s Central Jewish Museum remains a warning and a corrective. But in spite of this previous misappropriation, it would be a mistake to abandon the idea of the museum that I am presenting here, a museum which specifically enshrines the fragility and finitude of human life.

To continue, then, my argument for elucidating the irreducibility of death from the museum is structured along a scale, beginning with specific objects and individual subjects, continuing through an examination of the process of collecting and the nature of collections themselves, and ending with the role and function of museums as institutions in society.

**MUSEUM CONTENTS: MONUMENTS AND THE POSSESSIONS OF THE DEAD**

On one level, the association between museums and death is self-evident in its contents; some museums, notably of natural history, historically have literally been receptacles for dead things - stuffed taxidermic specimens, bones, fossils and so on. Collected animals and plants cease to be living things and become alienated

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Jewish Museum, see also The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections, ed. David Altschuler, New York, Summit Books, 1983.
CHAPTER THREE

The Dead, the Deadly, and the Deathly: Museums and the Mortification of Culture

FIGURE 6: Dublin Natural History Museum as ‘dead zoo’. 
objects, frozen in submission to the requirements of museum display.\(^9\) While such display is ostensibly based upon and justified by scientific principles, there is also an undeniably aesthetic, even decorative element, of nature reinvented as artifice or ornament, nature schematised.\(^{10}\) The sheer profligacy of dead animals, where multiple specimens have been collected to observe variations within one species, forms its own mode of display - one now associated with wastage and excess rather than the endless bounty of nature. Visiting some of the older natural history museums can give the unnerving impression of being in a dead version of the zoo - the same organisational principles, the same labelling, the same glass cages, even a similar collection of animal 'specimens' - the only difference appears to be in relative levels of animation.\(^{11}\) But these most obvious manifestations of the museum's deathliness, while they may a beginning, are far from the whole story.

Museums also hold the possessions of dead people, objects that were made, used or valued by individuals now gone. The anthropocentric bias of museums assumes that inanimate objects acquire or borrow a kind of 'life' from people. The physical mark, the documentary evidence, even the intangible 'aura' of

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\(^{9}\) Julian Walker writes of the cyclic trap inherent in such methods of display; discussing a Victorian 'cabinet' collection of 4000 pinned butterflies, he writes that '[t]hey are precious because we are killing them off, but we have to kill them because that is how we have taught ourselves to display them. The subtext shows us to be caught in a trap of our own making, though like the ensnared animal we do not see the complexity until we are held fast.' Julian Walker, 'Afterword: acquisition, envy and the museum visitor', in Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Experiencing Material Culture in the Western World*, Leicester University Press, London and New York, 1997, p. 261.

\(^{10}\) Michael Carter finds a similar 'decorative' and ornamental re-ordering of nature as artifice in women's hats in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where, as he writes, '[f]or a short while, in a certain place, Nature and humanity were at peace atop women's heads.' (p. 147) Here nature was not only exaggerated and distorted, but 'improved' - real stuffed barn owls were dyed pink, for instance. Elsewhere, Carter finds a similar schematisation of nature, but for the purpose of commerce, in the ornamental display of fish at the fishmongers. Not only was nature ordered, but it was ordered according to aesthetic principles. See Michael Carter, 'Hats, ornament and nature', in *Putting a Face on Things: Studies in Imaginary Materials*, Power Publications, Sydney, 1997, pp. 111-154, and 'Fishy arrangements: A Short Digression on Aesthetics', in *Imaginary Materials: A Seminar with Michael Carter*, ed. John Macarthur, IMA Publishing, Brisbane, 2000, pp. 13-22.

\(^{11}\) Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes ironically that the real difference between the two lies in their storage capacity, 'Dried, pickled, or stuffed, botanical and zoological specimens become artifacts for the museum. Alive, flora and fauna present storage problems that are solved by gardens and zoos in which living collections are on view...' See 'Objects of Ethnography', in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1991, p. 394.
these interactions between objects and people ensures the object's continued interest, even though museums act precisely to remove objects from their milieu in the life-world. Indeed it is the very intimacy of some such objects, their association with unknown persons long gone, that lends them an authenticity that is absent from more deliberate or official monuments. The indented thumbprint on an ancient pot intimates mortality more poignantly than a monolithic tomb ever could.

Art museums, with their ranked genealogies of dead artists, are particularly strong examples of the museum's role as a repository for relics, a site of anamnesis. In the following chapter I will discuss, through the writing of Filippo Marinetti, the modernist avant-garde's rejection of the weight of history that art museums represent, their consigning the artist to the fate of the epigone. The influence of the art market complicates the relationship of art museums to art production, and the lives of artists. The value of an artist's work rises steadily after their death because their oeuvre then becomes finite and closed, a restricted commodity. The fact that the art market is partly predicated on the death of artists is a point of great irony, but one that has been recognised by museums in the past. In its early history as an art museum, for instance, the Louvre placed a ban on the exhibition of work by living artists. The point of this was ostensibly to preserve the autonomy of museum art from the 'stain' of commercial circulation, the idea being that a living artist might benefit financially from museum purchases, which would then be subject to the 'taint of the marketplace.' A museum that exhibits only the work of dead artists becomes, in a sense, a kind of museum of mortality, the epitome of the institution's more general deathliness.

In some sense, almost every museum object is a monument, whether intentionally or not. Like all monuments, its character is double edged - to examine it is to recall the person who made, used, or owned the object, perhaps in the far distant past, but also to look ahead to a time after one's own death, when the object will continue unchanged. This monumental quality means that objects that have survived from the past connote the future, and thus demand scrupulous

13 Sherman, 'Quatremere / Benjamin / Marx', p. 133.
preservation, more strongly than the objects of the present. In other words, museum objects, like monuments, make tangible the ineffable temporal gap or caesura between past and present, and thereby also between present and future. This in turn is the basis of the museum object's value as a momento mori, and the source of its affect on human subjects, to which I will return.

But there are also powerful metaphorical association between the museum and mortality, which stem from its collecting processes. Critics have long likened the decontextualisation practiced by museums to a process of ‘killing’ objects, taking them out of a meaningful network of relationships in the life-world, connections with people, place, and function foremost amongst them, to be incarcerated, preserved and observed, in the ‘dead’ space of the museum. The museum’s decontextualising effects occur in both in time and space - objects are displaced from their surroundings, propinquities and spatial relationships in the world, just as they are plucked out of temporal flow, prevented from aging or developing patina, and held rigid in the fixed spatio-temporal matrix of museology. Museums are, in this respect, heterotopic, and particularly, as Michel Foucault would have it, ‘heterotopias of time’.

OBJECTS PRESERVED AND OBJECTS CONSERVED: THE MUSEUM AS HETEROTOPIA OF TIME

While a utopia is ‘no-place’, a conceptual ideal with no ‘real’ space in the world, a heterotopia is an actual, closed, ‘other’ space, where activities and rituals outside of the ordinary world take place. In Foucault’s conception, a heterotopia is utopian in the sense that it is set up as an ideally ordered space, but it exists beside or

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14 Julian Walker writes that, ‘we destroy the present every day without thinking that it too has to be preserved for the future.’ He continues: ‘The absence of attachment to contemporary articles, compared to the attitude of reverence for the past and the care to preserve it for the future, would seem to indicate that our attachment is to time rather than objects. We preserve our past to gain immortality in the future; the object preserved for projection into the future becomes a metonym for that future during its existence in the present … Compared with this, reverence for contemporaneous objects is perceived as cultish, childish or odd/collectorish; the collecting of contemporaneous objects is to be discouraged as quirky and an act of surrendering control to objects… the use of the present is contrasted with the preservation of the past for the future’. See Julian Walker, ‘Afterword: Acquisition, Envy and the Museum Visitor’, in Susan M. Pearce, ed., Experiencing Material Culture in the Western World, Leicester University Press, London and New York, 1997, pp. 258-259.
parallel to the actual world, rather than in opposition to it. Its order is of a practical, disciplinary, bureaucratic type. Foucault’s examples include psychiatric wards, prisons, cemeteries, brothels, and gardens, but he reserves for the library and museum the category of heterotopia where spatial division intersects with temporal accumulation;

These are heterotopias in which time does not cease to accumulate, perching, so to speak, on its own summit... The idea of accumulating everything... of creating a sort of universal archive, the desire to enclose all times, all eras, forms and styles within a single place, the concept of making all times into one place, and yet a place that is outside time, inaccessible to the wear and tear of the years, according to a plan of almost perpetual and unlimited accumulation within an irremovable place, all this belongs entirely to our modern outlook. Museums and libraries are heterotopias typical of nineteenth-century Western culture.¹⁵

Foucault is clearly referring here to the nineteenth-century, accumulative 'universal survey museum' model, which as he rightly states is inseparable from the ideals and 'metanarratives' of modernism. The question of whether museums in the postmodern era are still engaged with the representation of universality, whether they are still engaged in the creation of an archive, or even whether they are accumulative, are all arguable, and I will return to these questions in due course. The point that remains relevant, however, is that all museums offer a paradigm of both spatial and temporal order, and more particularly of a spatial order dictated by temporal order. This order is all the more perfect for being artificial and constructed, and thus it stands in contrast, as compensation, to the real world. A heterotopia is a place ‘as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state,’¹⁶ and is thus less a microcosm than an ideal model. The order of the museum can never be as perfect, complete, and unchanging as it aspires to be, never be a closed heterotopia, unless it excludes both life and death by excluding time.

Museums are places where objects are conserved and preserved, plucked out of the temporal flow of existence, their 'natural' processes of ageing and decay artificially arrested. The relationship between life and death is constructed by

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¹⁶ Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p. 356.
Western secular culture, in which the museum is firmly rooted, not as a continuum but a binary opposition, with life as the favoured term. Any institution that appears to deprive creatures and artefacts of their ‘life’ in the world is thus accused of ‘killing’ them, ossifying and objectifying them in order that they may cross the threshold into the museum. The museum has traditionally countered with the claim that in fact it ‘saves’ objects, giving them ‘eternal life’ through preservation and conservation. But these opposed arguments both miss the main point, which is that both life and death find no place in the fixed and unchanging temporal order of the museum. This is the paradox of the museum’s relationship to time, and therefore to mortality: rather than a variety of tomb, it is a place of the undead, a limbo state neither dead nor alive. By controlling and subverting time, museums impose an unnatural immortality, a state of being beyond mortality, even on objects that were never actually alive. This works both ways to produce an uncanny levelling effect, whereby stuffed specimens become weirdly animate, their upright postures and glass eyes belied by their stillness, and inanimate artefacts take on an uncanny, even watchful presence.

The museum is thus a receptacle for literally dead objects, for the traces and possessions of dead people, and for temporally and spatially displaced objects, alienated, preserved, and conserved in a ‘dead’ state. These three moments would make up the most obvious connection between the museums and mortality, at the level of ‘things’. But I would argue that the connection runs deeper than museum objects, and extends to the relationship of affect between these objects and the museum’s human subjects, then further to the museum as a collection.

‘IT IS INEVITABLY ONESELF THAT ONE COLLECTS’

Museum objects, simultaneously lifeless and immortal, may reinforce the longevity of culture, but for human subjects coming from ‘outside’, from the contingent world where there is no escape from human finitude, they can equally act as reminders of mortality - as momento mori. If for human beings the passing of time ultimately connotes the process of aging, followed inevitably by death, the temporality of objects works on a longer cycle. For humans there must be a kind of sublime ambivalence, a pleasure that is also terror, in contemplating the paradoxical
durability and fragility of things. This is especially true of objects that are apparently ephemeral, but yet have outlasted generations of people, and will continue to do so. Such a reminder of mortality is perhaps bearable in deliberate monuments, partly because of their massiveness and solidity, but also the fact that they have been erected specifically to endure. But the smaller, more apparently insignificant, and more fragile the object, the more poignant the fact of its survival in the face of the beholder's own inevitable demise.

The reading of objects as *momento mori* is of course not confined to the museum environment, nor is it restricted to objects that are already old.\(^{17}\) Such a reading is more a product of a melancholy sensibility than of the museum apparatus as such, a sensibility that reached its apotheosis in the *vanitas* emblems of the Baroque period, but which seems distinctly unpopular today.\(^ {18}\) Not only has the mass-production of commodities ensured that ordinary citizens of Western consumer culture live surrounded by a greater profusion of objects than ever before, but the process of collecting, of a whole range of object types, is one of the most widespread leisure activities practiced in such societies.\(^ {19}\) In this context, it is instructive to examine the work of Jean Baudrillard, who has demonstrated the value that personal collections hold in the formation of subjectivity, the simulation of individual control over time and space in the world, and the denial, or at least the warding off, of mortality.\(^ {20}\)

Baudrillard proposes a ‘System of Collecting’ whereby individuals in secular society can, by gathering and arranging objects, cope with the anxiety induced by the knowledge of their own mortality. He writes that such collections,

\(^{17}\) Indeed the mass-produced object represents a curious type of *momento mori* - its very seriality stands in marked contrast to the cult of the individual human subject, proving that just as an object need not be unique to endure, the uniqueness of the human subject proves to be meaningless in the face of mortality.

\(^{18}\) The purpose of the death's head motif in Baroque art, architecture, and even clothing and furnishings was to constantly remind the individual that material possessions provide no refuge from mortality, that you can't, as it were, take it with you. To forget one's own mortality, especially through the accumulation of possessions, would be a demonstration of false pride, just as the frequent contemplation of a death's head emblem would cultivate humility.


In our era of faltering religious and ideological authorities, ... are by way of becoming the consolation of consolations, an everyday myth capable of absorbing all our anxieties about time and death.\textsuperscript{21} The collection thus suggests a mundane, everyday means of \textit{forgetting} mortality, rather than some transcendent pretension to immortality. In Baudrillard’s system, the human subject collects, not only to establish and reinforce his or her own subjectivity, but also to simulate the subordination and control of space and time in the outside world. If it is true that 'It is invariably oneself that one collects', then the acts of gathering, arranging, sorting and 'fondling' the objects of a collection are all means of mirroring the subject back to itself.\textsuperscript{22}

Here we confront the very discourse of subjectivity, of which objects represent one of the most privileged registers - interposing, in that space between the irreversible flux of existence and our own selves, a screen that is discontinuous, classifiable, reversible, as repetitive as one could wish, a fringe of the world that remains docile in our physical or mental grip, and thus wards off all anxiety.\textsuperscript{23}

The collection thus acts as a protective yet permeable 'screen' or 'fringe' between the individual and the outer world, a space of interface that is controlled by the subject. As Baudrillard indicates, there is also a kind of systematised equivalency between time and space in the collection - not only can the objects be arranged and re-arranged in space, but they can also be 'repeated' or 'reversed'. The closed and controlled temporality of the collection is thus an interruption of the 'irreversible flux of existence'.

Baudrillard goes further, writing that the collection is quite literally a 'pastime', that 'by establishing a fixed repertory of temporal references that can be replayed at will, in reverse order if need be, collecting represents the perpetual fresh beginning of a controlled cycle, thanks to which, starting out from any term he chooses and confident of returning to it, man can engage in the great game of birth and death.\textsuperscript{24} Here he draws an analogy with Sigmund Freud's analysis of the 'fort / da' game, through which, in Freud's conception, a child comes to terms with the

\textsuperscript{21} Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', p. 17.
\textsuperscript{22} Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', p. 12.
\textsuperscript{24} Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', p. 16.
absence of its mother. In this game the child throws a ball on a string such that it disappears, only to reappear, the anguish of lack being always cyclically followed by reassuring presence. In Baudrillard's analogy, the collector also engages in a cyclical game, rearranging the objects of the collection such as to make them 'absent' and then 'present' again, but this time as part of a process of mourning - a means of accommodating not the absence of the mother, but absence per se - 'the anguish-laden fact of lack – of literal death'. Thus it is the very incorporation of death, and not its exclusion from the collection, that enables the collector to 'accommodate' the knowledge of mortality, to indirectly mourn their own inevitable death, and thus to live on; 'the object is that through which we mourn for ourselves, in the sense that, in so far as we truly possess it, the object stands for our own death, symbolically transcended.'

THE PUBLIC COLLECTION AND THE PRIVATE COLLECTION

Now the relationship between a private collector and their possessions is clearly quite different from that between a museum visitor and the objects in a public museum. For one thing, the very act of collecting, including the thrill of acquisition, is inaccessible to the museum visitor. As Stephen Greenblatt writes, '[t]he whole experience of most art museums is about not touching, not carrying home, not owning the marvellous objects. Modern museums in effect at once evoke the dream of possession and evacuate it.' While the museum's contents may be the 'property' of the populace, they were not in any affective sense acquired by the populace. They belong symbolically to everyone and thus practically and intimately to no one, and they are usually also the result of someone else's collecting.

Nevertheless, Baudrillard's thesis does offer an insight into public collections. In many ways the private collection can be seen as a consolation and corrective to the fate of the subject as projected by museums. If the private

25 Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', p. 17
collection allows the individual to forget the fear of their own inevitable death and continue as though they were immortal, the museum effaces the individual in its dedication to expressing the longevity of the collective, of culture and history. It is possible to draw an analogy between the relationship of the individual and their personal collection and the relationship of society and the museum collection: the museum collection has a similar semantic weight, but works on a larger scale - the collection allows the museum to continue as though culture itself was endless, as though culture was 'immortal'.

But the museum's connotation of mortality is more complex than the simple erasure of the individual in the face of the mass. The museum is simultaneously a means of forgetting or warding off the finitude of culture itself, and a monument that points towards the inevitability of that end. It is only by embodying the 'mortality' of culture, by making death and obsolescence inherent, that the museum can offer any kind of reassurance or illusion of control. In its efforts to defuse the powerfully destructive effects of time and flux, the museum is, paradoxically, always already a place of the dead. It offers a space of contemplation, and a means of mourning, both for the end of the self and for the end of culture.

POSSESSION AND PROXIMITY: WALTER BENJAMIN THE COLLECTOR
The relationship between public and private collections has also been examined by Walter Benjamin. He based his position on the collector and collecting around the intimacy between an individual subject and a specific object, claiming it to be a relationship of mutual 'possession'. Benjamin was himself a collector; he collected children's books and toys, wrote a charming short essay on book collecting, and indeed believed that 'collecting is an ur-phenomenon of knowledge: the student collects knowledge.' Benjamin's main treatise, the Passagen-Werk or 'Arcades Project' can itself be seen as a collection, an accumulation of notes and quotations

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gathered over the course of years. The process of collecting, and writing about his collections, was thus central to Benjamin’s critical practice, and also to his concept of historical materialism. While he made few comments about museums specifically, his valorisation of the contingent and personal, and suspicion of the public and authoritative, indicates his preference for the amateur individual as the ‘true’ collector. In 'Unpacking My library', Benjamin writes that '[t]he phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter." Much of the significance of the personal collection, the reason that objects 'get their due' there, is derived from the collector's personal ownership of the objects:

The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership - for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object." Benjamin's 'true' or 'genuine' collector is thus an individual who rescues objects, who liberates them from use-value and the endless circulation of commodities. Such a collecting practice does not 'kill' objects, but rather offers them new life: they are not deprived of context, but inserted into a new, equally rich and meaningful one, which adds another layer of ownership, use, and physical trace to the object's provenance. For such a collector, collection and recollection are intimately intertwined, memory and childlike imagination combine in new ways to endlessly 'renew' and 'reanimate' objects. In a personal collection the object is evocative, a prompt for personal, involuntary memory, beginning with the memory of its acquisition. Benjamin writes of the 'intimacy' of the relationship between

31 Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', p. 68.
32 Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library:', p. 62.
33 'I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of a book is its rebirth. This is the childlike element that in a collector mingles with the element of old age. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways... To renew the old world - that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things...' Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', p. 63.
34 Leslie notes that Benjamin's valorisation of involuntary memory draws on Proust, and his 'evocative crumb of madeleine'. She writes that '[t]he collector does not amass the hoard of
collector and collected object, of the 'spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions.'

It is clear that Benjamin's true collector is engaged not only in a form of practical memory, but in the gathering of practical, that is to say material, history. The distinction between history and memory is deliberately occluded. Historical materialism, in Benjamin's conception, is the product of an individual, specific, collector's sensibility. The historical materialist does not collect the spoils of victory, but rather rescues the fragile, lost, and abandoned traces of contingent life in the world, those objects and images in danger of passing and being forgotten. The liberating, 'epochal' power of this practice comes precisely from the fact that Benjamin's flâneur, haunting the Paris arcades, collects objects that are already outdated, that are in the very process of being carried off into obsolescence by the 'storm' of progress. The act of halting their disappearance, of redeeming them, represents a fleeting moment of unique engagement or 'proximity' between past and present, or more specifically, of the past seen uniquely through the present, and held close in the form of an object.

Benjamin thus erects an opposition between the personal, historical materialism of the individual collector, and a conventional, triumphal historicism. Although he does not specifically state it, this would also be the distinction between the personal collection and the public, museum collection. In saving objects and giving them their due, the personal collector is also giving events their due, remembering the fallen and forgotten in history. Museums, on the other hand, have traditionally been one of the main institutions where the spoils of victorious history objects as dead material. That is the debased attitude of the souvenir-hunter. Substituting for genuine experience, the souvenir attempts to generate intentional memory, voluntary memory, which is for Benjamin never true memory. True memory is involuntary memory, holds Benjamin after Proust... Involuntary memory summons up, in one flash, the narrator's past or a past ready for narration, out of the blue. For Proust, involuntary memory is impromptu, bouncing off objects encountered randomly. It is lucid, pre-verbal, and coupled with euphoria, which is why, in Proust as in Benjamin, such memories are often linked with childhood. Involuntary memory provides an unanticipated link between an experience in the present and one in the past.' Leslie, 'Telescoping the Microscopic Object', p. 68.

35 He continues: 'Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories.' Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', pp. 61-62.
are collected. There is a vital distinction here between the personal collector's pursuit of 'completeness', which is the inherence of all the knowledge, memory, and imaginative associations of an object within that object itself, and the museum's construction of a series of objects to stand for the kind of seamless, universalising 'cultural history' which Benjamin's historical materialism specifically opposed. Douglas Crimp has perceptively identified the distinction between public, museum collections and the personal collection as Benjamin describes it,

The museum constructs a cultural history by treating its objects independently both of the material conditions of their own epoch and of those of the present. In Benjamin's collection, objects are also wrested from history, but they are "given their due," re-collected in accordance with the political perception of the moment. Thus the difference: "Historicism presents an eternal image of the past, historical materialism a specific and unique engagement with it ... The task of historical materialism is to set to work an engagement with history original to every new present. It has recourse to a consciousness of the present that shatters the continuum of history."  

The idea that museums 'kill' objects by wrenching them out of historical context has been a re-occurring theme throughout museum criticism, and I will examine this more closely in the next chapter. In this context, though, Benjamin's critique is particularly interesting for the positive alternative that it offers. The vital point here is that the historical materialist must kill objects in order to bring them alive again, that this is a necessary, rather than a negative, part of the process. The notion that only that which has passed can be redeemed, only that which is dead can be

36 'Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror... There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as much as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.' Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Illuminations, Fontana Press, London, 1992, p. 248.

resurrected, is constant throughout Benjamin's thought. In fact the destructive and redemptive poles of Benjamin’s thought form a dialectic around the fate of the historical object, where the historical materialist alternates between the need to ‘kill’ such objects and the need to ‘rescue’ them; ‘in a genuine historiography, the saving impulse is as strong as the destructive one.’ The necessity of ‘killing’ objects by forcibly tearing them from the stranglehold of history is balanced against the task of conserving those which dominant history has bypassed, objects which are already ‘dead’, and thus fated to ‘disappear irretrievably’.

The field of ruins is thus the preserve of both the collector and the historical materialist, and indeed there is a curious correspondence between the decontextualisation practiced by each. Benjamin’s interest in the Paris arcades was precisely in the outmoded character of their contents, the fossilised residue of outdated commodity culture. The arcades therefore offered a readymade field of ‘ruins’, produced not by natural decay, nor by the destructive impulse of positive barbarism, but the mortifying effects of passing fashion. Such objects ‘forgotten, passed over in silence, or suppressed by dominant history did not require further demythification, but were available for ‘rescue’ through collection.

38 ‘Whether allegory, destruction of aura or redemption of the past, the one fundamental idea in Benjamin’s thought returns as the ambivalence of secularization and redemption: only that which is dead can be resurrected.’ David Roberts, ‘Beyond Progress: The Museum and Montage’, Theory Culture & Society, vol. 5, 1988, p. 554.
40 ‘[Benjamin’s] objective was to “rescue” […] historical objects by ripping them out of the developmental histories - of law, religion, art, etc - into which fictional and falsifying narratives they had been inserted in the process of their transmission’. Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, p. 218.
41 Werckmeister, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History…’ p. 261.
INSTITUTIONALISING SACRIFICE: THE MUSEUM AND THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

The idea that the museum is a site where individuals sacrifice the possibility of personal ownership, in favour of the idea of art and history as the shared property of all, is also evinced in the work of Georges Bataille. Of course, in the discourse on the history and theory of museums Bataille is something of a marginal figure. Many of his contentions are extreme, perhaps even unsupportable. But nevertheless the implications of some of his work remain significant, and his brief comments on museums, in particular, bear directly upon the present argument. His work raises the possibility that objects and artworks that have entered the museum are sacrifices to democracy, community, and communality.

Bataille's interest in the origin of the modern museum is rather different from that of the majority of conventional historians. In an article published under the title 'Museum' in his journal *Documents*, Bataille asserted that 'the first museum in the modern sense of the word (that is to say, the first public collection) would seem to have been founded on July 27, 1793, in France, by the Convention.' But while for other historians the significance of this lies largely in the 'democratic' opening of this first public museum, Bataille's emphasis lies elsewhere, and he adds that '[t]he origin of the modern museum would thus be linked to the development of the guillotine.' For Bataille, the modern museum began at the moment that the King of France lost his head, and indeed was intended as a replacement for the sovereign. He locates the origin of the modern museum in death, the product of violent revolution and ritual execution, and thus locates murder, death and sacrifice at the very heart of one of society's most conservative institutions.

The 'Museum' article was originally published as a kind of postscript to an earlier piece called 'Slaughterhouse' ('Abattoir'), where Bataille explicitly linked the museum and the slaughterhouse as two poles of a 'sacred nucleus' revolving

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44 Bataille, 'Museum', quoted Bois and Krauss, p. 47
around sacrifice and slaughter. In his study of Bataille's writings, Dennis Hollier writes that for him

Slaughterhouses, along with the museum, make up a system in which the ambivalence defining the sacred nucleus is at work: the slaughterhouses are the negative pole, the generator of repulsion, the centrifuge... Museums, the pole of attraction, are centripetal. But within the heart of one the other is hidden. At the heart of beauty lies a murder, a sacrifice, a killing (no beauty without blood).46

Much of Bataille's wider critical project was engaged with demonstrating this 'ambivalence', the mutual inclusivity of the low within the high, formlessness within order, the stain at the heart of beauty.47 The museum and slaughterhouse couplet are a particularly potent incorporation of these apparent 'opposites' because they breach the threshold between the sacred and profane.48 For Bataille, via Freud, 'sacred' has a double meaning: a portion set aside, whether for preservation or for sacrifice, it is both holy and accursed.49 Both institutions thus attain a cultic or

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46 Bataille, 'Abattoir', quoted by Hollier, Against Architecture, p. xiii. Bataille's reference to the centrifugal nature of the slaughterhouse and the centripetal nature of the museum is in fact a reference to urban planning - museums are located at the heart of cities, while slaughterhouses are placed further and further out on the edges. Michel Foucault makes a similar observation about cemeteries, which 'from the nineteenth century on... began to be shifted to the outskirts of the cities', as a result of the populace's growing obsession with death as a form of sickness or contagion. It seems fair to say that in both cases disgust at and fear of death, whether of animal or human, is manifest in spatial terms. See Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', in Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory, ed. Neil Leach, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 354.

47 See Krauss, 'No More Play', p. 54: 'In its confounding of the logic that maintains terms like high and low, or base and sacred as polar opposites, it is this play of the contradictory that allows one to think the truth that Bataille never tired of demonstrating: that violence has historically been lodged at the heart of the sacred; that to be genuine, the very thought of the creative must simultaneously be an experience of death; and that it is impossible for any moment of true intensity to exist apart from a cruelty that is equally extreme.'

48 With reference to Emile Durkheim's analysis of the structures of religious thought, Annette Michelson has identified the division of things and ideas into either sacred or profane realms as fundamental to all religion. In the conventional religious understanding, the opposition is absolute - there is no shared ground between the two realms, and there can be no possible transmission between them except via transformation, rebirth, and metamorphosis - as in the rite of passage. Bataille's strategy of radical transgression, however, is built around the threshold between the two, seeking the sacred within that which is cast off, excreted, repressed, and the profane within the 'high' institutions of culture - notably religion, and of course the museum. See Annette Michelson, 'Heterology', October, vol. 36, Spring 1986, pp. 114-116.

49 Bois and Krauss write that 'Bataille had read... and could only have been struck by' Freud's study of the repressed or double meaning of some words, including the Latin altus, which means both 'high' and 'deep', and sacer, which means both 'sacred' and 'accursed'. See Bois and Krauss, Formless: A User's Guide, p. 50.
religious significance - the slaughterhouse because of its sacrificial character, in the 'ritual' or systematic killing of animals, and the museum because of its purpose as a storehouse for sacred objects that, furthermore, is visited on Sunday - the sacred day.50

The currently popular notion of the art museum as 'secular cathedral' takes on a range of interesting connotations in light of Bataille's thesis. The idea that one might 'worship' at the altar of high art assumes that art objects have already been sacrificed, in the sense of being set aside and taken out of circulation in the world, to allow their own glorification.51 Both the cathedral and the art museum are heterotopias, as has already been noted, and as with all such spaces they demand a gesture of genuflection at the threshold. It is the very crossing of this threshold that both canonises and 'kills' the artwork.

THE MUSEUM AS STILL LIFE

If I have examined the inherence of mortality at the level of the museum object, the individual museum subject and by extension the private collection, and the public museum collection, I must now return to the idea of the museum as mortification of culture – that is, the inherence of deathliness in the very institution itself. Didier Maleuvre has recently pursued this thesis, in his outstanding book Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art. The text contains an elegant meditation on the museum object as momento mori, and its implications both for the individual subject and the collective institution. In a lengthy analysis of the opening chapter of Balzac's novel Le Peau de chagrin, Maleuvre reads the scene of the narrative - an antiquarian's shop - as an allegory of the museum in the dawning age of mass production. Reading the setting of the scene in a curiosity shop as a mark of the

50 "Abbatoir" describes ... a movement of sacred horror, of religious repulsion before the killing of an animal. The second article, "Musee," describes the opposite movement. Attraction follows repulsion.' Dennis Holler, Against Architecture, p. xiii

51 This is also the 'neutralisation' of art as a social and political force that Adorno discusses, and as Linda Nochlin writes, 'In a sense, the creation of the museum was a token of art's impotence, its final severence from the social structure, setting it apart, like religion, for weekend worship.' Linda Nochlin, 'Museums and Radicals: A History of Emergencies', in Brian O'Doherty ed, Museums in Crisis, George Braziller, New York, 1972, p. 8.
nineteenth-century liquidation and commodification of history,\textsuperscript{52} he writes that 'the antique shop, where every object is for sale, stands for the economic reality of a world in which history, art, and art history have become consumable objects'.\textsuperscript{53} These objects, which in the narrative include a human skull, are 'objectified', seen as though represented in a still life, and thus take on the character of \textit{momento mori},

The object reminds me that I will inevitably become an object (the skull) and that things will carry on exactly the same after my death. Both ways, the object's autonomy reminds me of my death. Indeed the object's existence is an \textit{insistence}, the being-there of the object's superiority over the transience of human existence. All objects, not solely the antique or the skull, are omens concerning human finitude. Their very existence harbours the script of human obsolescence...\textsuperscript{54}

More than simply marking the finitude of the mortal human being, however, objects also mark the mortality of culture,

[Objects] are the bony remains of yesterday's civilisations, but also, \textit{in advance}, the ossuary of civilisation. Objects are culture's future remains \textit{today}. Hence, objects not only represent the corpses of antique civilisations, they also prefigure the world's future death... objects are always funereal objects. Objects not only play dead and remain dead in the world; they are also the death of the world, the haunting image of its passing away, the skull beneath the skin of culture. Objects remind the living of their dead (\textit{momento mori}) as well as of the death of culture; they are what will constitute the corpse of this civilisation. Objects embalm culture while it is still alive. They... force culture to play dead.\textsuperscript{55}

In this conception, museum objects are ruins before the fact. Maleuvre reads in the museum an uncanny collapsing of past, present, and future tenses - its objects are the remains of the present and the past as they will be seen in the future. To visit the museum is thus to snatch a glimpse at a time beyond the end of culture, and after the death of the individual. The museum's accumulative nature only accentuates this effect, by filling the museum's spaces with the endless proliferation of objects and the products of human hand, it marks the inadequacy of objects to halt the tide of time. The museum is thus always a monument to the

\textsuperscript{52} Maleuvre, \textit{Museum Memories}, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{53} Maleuvre, \textit{Museum Memories}, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{54} Maleuvre, \textit{Museum Memories}, p. 265
\textsuperscript{55} Maleuvre, \textit{Museum Memories}, pp. 265-266
passage of its own culture, it is not only directed backwards to history but ahead to its own ruin, the horizon or vanishing point of history. The museum waits for the time when it will no longer exist alongside the life world, in conjunction and competition with it, but hold the only traces of a ruined world, when it is truly an ossuary or tomb.

The museum's eventual transformation into an actual mausoleum would thus be its teleological endpoint, even its goal; reversing the narrative of progress upon which the museum has long been predicated, this would be paradoxically a 'progression' towards ruination. It hardly needs to be stated that while Maleuvre finds the inherence of the end of culture within the museum to be a melancholy but essentially positive influence, others would read it as less so. If the museum becomes both container and expression of ruination, and acts as a kind of momento mori for culture itself, then there are those who would believe that the museum itself is stultifying culture, dragging it down with the weight of history, stifling new growth and new expression and life in the present.

THE FUNEREALEX ORIGINS OF MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE
The idea that museum architecture, both historically and in the present day, has its own connections with mortality and mortification will be argued at length later in the dissertation. But given that this chapter has promised to demonstrate the inherence of death at every level of the institution, from subject and object, through collection, institution, and finally architecture, this latter must at least be touched upon here, at the level of architectural style, and of the allusions and implications of classicism in particular. As Duncan and Wallach write, ‘[m]useums belong to the same architectural and art-historical category as temples, churches, shrines, and certain types of palaces.’ They continue, ‘[t]his comparison is not simply a convenient metaphor: museums share fundamental characteristics with traditional ceremonial monuments,’ and sure enough, much of the history of museum architecture, even in the modern period, has been inextricably linked with the language and implications of classicism and neo-classicism. Throughout the history of the

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FIGURE 7: British Museum, London (above) and Altes Museum, Berlin (middle and below). Classical architecture as funereal.
museum, classicism has been regarded as the most appropriate architectural language through which to represent the tradition, prestige, and *gravitas* of the institution. Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin is an excellent example of a museum building that is also an acknowledged masterpiece of neo-classicism. Likewise, Smirke's British Museum building expresses the convergence of past cultural heritage and future cultural aspiration, the idea of the museum as an encyclopedic microcosm of the world and paragon of civilisation itself.

But classical architecture itself has religious and funereal origins. Joseph Rykwert relates the legend, purportedly told by the Greek Callimachus, of how the Corinthian order was founded – when a basket filled with the possessions of a dead Corinthian maiden was used to mark her grave. The fronds of an acanthus plant grew up through this basket, and, so the legend goes, thus was the order founded: on the death of an unfortunate girl. Speaking in more historically verifiable terms, Greek temple architecture was set aside as a house for the gods, and thus was the material objectivation of the large questions – of fate, destiny, the role of the gods, the meaning of life and death, and the possibility of an afterlife. It was the Greek temple front, as adopted and adapted first by the Romans, then brilliantly rediscovered and reinterpreted in the Italian Renaissance, systematised and technologically updated in eighteenth-century neo-classicism, and continually reprised up until the present day, that became the accepted and conventional language for much monumental museum architecture. It was not only the venerability of this architectural language that loaned it such a long hegemony over museum architecture – it was also its specific temporality. To house a museum within an architectural language, if not an actual building, that was itself ancient (or derived from ancient sources) doubled its temporal propriety. As Duncan and Wallach write,

Museums built during the first great age of museum building deliberately recalled past ceremonial architecture. The forms that were chosen evoked temples, palaces, treasuries and tombs. This eclectic and often pedantic architecture drew upon the complex of interconnected meanings associated with the ceremonial architecture of the ancient world. Museums were

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simultaneously temples, palaces, treasuries and tombs – buildings filled with echoes of ancient ceremonial practices of accumulation and display. The use of traditional forms represents not only a revival of architectural styles, but also a modern adaptation of those ancient practices. The museum thus recalls what might be termed the museum functions of earlier architecture – the ceremonial display of votive offerings in temple treasuries or of relics in cathedral chapels and crypts.\(^{58}\)

Here they emphasise several other reasons why museum architecture might allude to the language of classicism – not only because of the ceremonial or ritual function that museums fulfil, but also because of their function as crypts or vaults, storing and protecting, but also to a certain extent entombing precious cultural, historical, and natural objects. It is fair to say, then, that the historical layering of deathliness in museum architecture is itself complex, and bears important implications for museums into the present day.

So in this first section of the chapter I have argued that the museum’s deathliness in inherent at the level of object, subject, collection, institution, and architecture. But it is precisely this inherence that has been comprehensively disavowed in recent years. In order to examine what is at stake in this disavowal, and how it is at precisely the point where it is most denied that deathliness paradoxically becomes most important, it will be necessary to turn to some more recent cultural movements.

**PART TWO: POSTMODERNISM AS HISTORICAL CRUX**

The changing role and nature of the museum can be located in the context of a broader cultural shift, gathered under the sign of postmodernism. I use the word 'postmodern' here to refer specifically to a poststructuralist stream of critical thought, rather than the 'neoconservative' stylistic historicism that was labelled 'postmodern' in architecture.\(^{59}\) Postmodernism, particularly that strain defined by Hal Foster as ‘critical postmodernism’, has taken the cultural metanarratives of the

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59 The term 'postmodern' has clearly become overdetermined with contrary meanings. Hal Foster has followed the varieties and mutations of these meanings over several decades, see for example his '(Post)Modern Polemics' in the special edition of New German Critique dedicated to 'Modernity and Postmodernity', New German Critique, vol. 33, Fall 1984, pp. 67-78, and Frederic Jameson's 'The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate', in the same edition, pp. 53-65.
modernist project as mythologies to be deconstructed. Indeed, postmodernism has most often been defined in the negative, in its relativism and opposition to received ideas; it has been described by one of its primary theorists, Jean-François Lyotard, as an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives,’ and is more appropriately defined as a sensibility or ‘condition’ than an organised and coherent ‘movement’. The rhetorical commonplaces of postmodernism barely need to be repeated in the early twenty-first century, they can be reeled off in a millenarian litany of deaths: ‘death of ideologies (Lyotard); of industrial society (Bell); of the real (Baudrillard); of authorship (Barthes); of man (Foucault); of history (Kojève) and, of course, of modernism (all of us when we use the word post-modern). But it is precisely this listing of deaths, which I will call the ‘discourse of ends’, that can be seen as a phenomenon or symptom particular to critical postmodernism.

At the height of postmodernism’s fervour, the discourse of ends worked its way through all of the great metanarratives of the modern epoch, culminating in the apparent ‘end’ of the overarching discourses of art, history and philosophy. It was unified only by the common shadow of a historical, yet ultimately undefined ‘end of modernism’, and there was an almost pathological thoroughness in the process through which the discourse of ends evoked each modernist metanarrative in order to then proclaim it ‘dead’. The original ‘loss’ of modernism was thus indefinitely postponed, compulsively repeated in miniature with every other ‘end’ proclaimed, producing a series of open-ended end-conditions that might serve as a loose definition of postmodernism itself, characterised by Lyotard as ‘a vague, apparently inexplicable, end-of-the-century melancholy. The discourse of ends was therefore not solely a manic or delirious fin de siècle fatalism, but a protracted work of

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61 It should be noted here that the fervour of this type of apocalyptic thinking has cooled with the new century, and that the discourse of ends, and even the idea of postmodernism as a new and distinct historical period, has come to be doubted and undermined in many circles, even by some of its main protagonists. In art and architecture, for instance, the revision of postmodernism has led to its being largely erased as a category, subsumed instead as a phase of late- or neo-modernism. Nevertheless, I would argue that the distinction and the category are still important in museums. The museum was one of the principal objects of postmodern critique, and as such it could hardly fail to be affected; the postmodern moment stands as an historical marker for a specific and significant shift in thinking and methodology.

mourning for an absent totality, the end of certainty and meaning within the end of modernism. Jacques Derrida writes that 'this discourse ...this tone of the vigil at the moment of the end... is also that of the funeral watch, of the Wake...,' and it was the various avant-garde positions gathered under the name of postmodernism which were assembled for the requiem.

The discourse of ends could be read as the surreptitious return of modernist ideals, a series of imperfect attempts to project an overriding meaning onto a history which, in the absence of metanarratives, appeared terrifyingly chaotic, arbitrarily destructive, and 'meaningless'. The disguised return of modernism can also be discerned in the continuing success of the museum institution. If the museum's traditional role was to subdue the bewildering heterogeneity of the world through the collection and classification of objects, it could now be seen as being itself an historical relic, a monument to a particular view of history specific to the modern period. As a bastion of modernist thought the museum was announced dead and ruined by the discourse of ends, renounced along with history itself. Far from disappearing, however, the museum made an unprecedented resurgence in the 80's, a trend that continues today. Andreas Huyssen has drawn a direct correlation between this international 'museum mania' and the discourse of ends, proposing that 'the success of the museum may well be one of the salient symptoms of Western culture in the 1980s: ever more museums were planned and built as the practical corollary to the "end of everything"

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63 Anthony Vidler points out that the 'disease of ends' has a history of its own, but makes a distinction between early manifestations including Nietzsche's proclamation of the 'death of God' and Hegel's 'end of art', and more recent 'ends' which explicitly refer to the influence of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought. It is this reading of the phenomenon as a symptom of the postmodern condition that interests me here. Anthony Vidler, 'Art History Posthistoire', The Art Bulletin, vol. 7, 1994, p. 408.
The dire predictions of postmodernism, which saw the museum as a doomed institution, have thus paradoxically been both realised and reversed.

So the postmodern period saw a self-proclaimed crux in the history of the museum, as entrenched modes of thought were systematically dismantled in the name of a new order of plurality and heterogeneity. It was at this point that the low rumble of criticism that had been present throughout the life of the modern institution grew into a cacophony. If Marxism had provided the most viable position from which to criticise the museum in the early modern period, feminism, postcolonialism, and all the other discursive stances that made up the loose collective called postmodernism now arrayed themselves around the museum institution in a concerted attack. While I have addressed some of their arguments in the previous chapters, what interests me here is not the minutiae of each of these discourses, but their common thread - which was that the museum in its modern form was a dead and ruined institution, and if it wasn’t then it should be. Now it is not surprising that the museum would be a principal target for postmodernism’s assault on established institutions, since it was a primary expression of the ideological and epistemological structure of the modernist worldview. Even considering these factors, though, the vehemence and severity of the attack is startling. Whatever the specific reasons for this, it is clear that if the institution was to endure into the new order of the postmodern period it had to do nothing less than reverse its nature: from being a deathly, inherently rearguard, 'high' cultural institution, into being a progressive place of entertainment and liveliness. The distinction between the 'bad old' institution and this vision of a glorious, exciting new museum was conceived in many quarters as a binary opposition.

Postmodern criticism holds the modern museum responsible for a multitude of sins. It is criticised for enshrining conservative and patriarchal establishment values, upholding exclusionary class structures, being elitist and thus undemocratic, maintaining a hegemony over knowledge, authenticity, and truth, participating in the commodification of art, having a stultifying effect on culture, and being boring. The litany goes on. The museum as an archive is thus

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seen to hold more than just objects, but to be a repository for establishment values, a backward-looking, literally conservative institution. That these negative associations are attached to the museum's archive function is significant, and hold marked implications for the status of the museum object, as I have noted. Postmodernism undermined the museum's self-definition as an institution where the 'truth' could be 'discovered' through research carried out on a collection of things. It did so not only by undermining the museum's truth claims, but also by destabilising truth as a project. But I would argue that all of these complaints can be ultimately traced back to the underlying meta-discourse of the museum's deathliness. Opposition to this deathliness called for a new institution altogether.

TECHNOLOGY, IMMATERIALITY, AND LIVELINESS

Andrea Witcomb, in a paper entitled 'The End of the Mausoleum: Museums in the Age of Electronic Communication', argues that the historical association between museum and mausoleum, as expressed by Adorno in the quotation at the head of this chapter, can and should be dispelled by new museum practices. She argues quite explicitly for a 'lively' museum, to be achieved through technology. Witcomb finds the source of the mausoleum association in the museum's traditional orientation towards the collection and display of objects, and finds also that this orientation has been responsible for some of the museum's more hegemonic discourses; '[t]he materiality of objects seemed [in traditional museums] to provide an empirical basis for nineteenth century ideas of civilisation as material progress at the same time as supporting ideas of authenticity and originality.'67 Citing the New Museology and its critique of commodity fetishism, elitism, and bourgeois values, Witcomb proposes that by shifting its focus from material objects to information communicated through electronic media, the museum can '... get away from the reified concepts of authenticity, aura and originality which have been, until recently, the basis for the museum's claim to knowledge. This ... opens up a space for museums which frees them of their necessary association with the nation-state

and with hierarchical forms of power. More than breaking down such centralised and absolute conceptions of knowledge and authority, this new emphasis in museums would also reflect wider cultural trends, and emphasise the museum's new, more relevant role, as a 'site of cultural, technological and social convergences.'

Witcomb herself notes that some recent museums have been rather naive and utopian in their embrace of electronic technologies. But the assumption remains pervasive: the inclusion of new technologies will not only connect the museum in a more meaningful way with the profound shifts occurring in our post-industrial, media-saturated age, but that it will finally dispel the 'mausoleum' association, and thus allow museums to take part in debates about contemporary culture in the world. The only dissent, in this scenario, would come from those who think that objects are central to, and indeed definitive of the museum experience, and are the only thing that serves to distinguish it from other competing media. From that position, and if objects themselves are the source of the museum's 'mausoleum' character, it is possible to question whether it necessarily follows that a museum without objects will automatically be more 'lively', that it will be a medium of articulation rather than representation, and indeed that it will be a museum at all. In spite of these doubts, many museums today seem to have embraced the rhetoric of liveliness.

In striving to negotiate a meaningful relationship between their ‘audience’ and their objects, be they art or artefact, many contemporary museums increasingly come to seem like an entirely staged and theatrical event. The trend towards interactivity and ‘entertainmentality’, in all its forms, is the museum’s attempt to provoke an active engagement between the subject and historical discourse, to underpin absent and immaterial history through individual corporeal experience, to bind together history and memory. Whether this engagement is for the purposes of education or of empathy, whether it is provoked through art or technology or conventional museum display, it is at base the same impulse – to

68 Witcomb, 'The End of the Mausoleum', p. 144.
69 Witcomb, 'The End of the Mausoleum', p. 143.
use spatial and aesthetic devices to affect the subject in the present into a meaningful understanding of the past. The contemporary museum thus has the potential to join the stage set as a total environment for the spatial and temporal staging of experience, a multi-media *Gesamtkunstwerk* of historical and aesthetic representation. A similar project to this, though with different objects, has been examined by Michael Fried. It is worthwhile here to complicate and reframe the relationship between objects, representation, and the question of ‘liveliness’ in museums more generally, through Fried’s terms.

**OBJECTHOOD, THEATRICALITY, AND REPRESENTATION**

In his seminal 1967 essay, ‘Art and Objecthood’, Fried argued for the inherent formal values of high modern sculpture and painting, as against the intermediality of minimal (or, as he insists, ‘Literalist’) art. This concept sits within a particular stream of art theory which holds that artworks, in addition to being autonomous of social, political, and economic conditions, are also in some sense autonomous of being objects at all, and I raised this briefly in the preface to this dissertation. Fried’s thesis is important here for its assertion that artworks can be distinguished from artefacts at all, and that this distinction turns upon the presence or absence of the quality of ‘objecthood’. But more than this, the essay notes that a deliberate play on the edges between art and objecthood can be a legitimate aesthetic strategy in itself. Given that such a play is now also occurring in museums, Fried’s essay provides a route by which it is possible to approach the blurring of disciplinary distinctions between art and history, artwork and artefact, in the museum institution itself.

In the ‘Art and Objecthood’ essay Fried rails against what he sees as an increasingly ‘theatrical’ turn in the contemporary art of the day, which is epitomised for him in Minimal art, the primary target of the essay. Contrasting the work of Minimalists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris against high modernist painting and sculpture, Fried finds that Minimalism, though three dimensional, seeks to avoid being classified as either painting or sculpture. He argues that unlike a high modernist work which denies its base physical existence to the extent that it is ‘in some essential respect not an object’, the Minimalist work flaunts or emphasises its artefactual or object character - its ‘objecthood’. By flirting with the
appearance of objecthood, that is, the quality that all non-art objects have, Minimalism is thus engaging in a theatrical game with the spectator around the question of whether or not it is art. Minimalism deliberately blurs categorical definitions, confusing the distinction not only between painting and sculpture, but also between art and non-art. It is this projection of ‘objecthood’ that enables a Minimalist art object to masquerade as a mere ‘object in the world’ – that is to say an artefact – by duplicitously approximating the ‘look of non-art’. Playing on the beholder’s expectations of what an art object should look like, or rather what it shouldn’t look like, Minimalism is engaged in a self-reflexive, theatrical game of charades.

Fried also frames his objection to Minimalism around the fact that it is relational. Unlike modernist painting and sculpture, where relationships are all internal, produced by the formal necessities of a particular medium, minimalism initiates relationships both between media, and with elements that are outside of the work altogether. These elements include the architectural setting – the space and ambient effects in which the work is displayed, and the audience: ‘Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work...the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation - one which, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.’

A relationship between art object and perceiving subject is thus initiated, based upon the artwork’s oddly human ‘presence’ in the space, a ‘confronting’ presence that ‘demands that the beholder take it into account’. In Fried’s terms Minimalist art not only involves, but is actually constituted by its audience, and by the specific situation in which the beholder apprehends the work. Furthermore, the relationship is also a function of time, the duration of the beholder’s experience of the work. While time is irrelevant to the apprehension of an hieratic modernist art work, which in Fried’s terms enjoys the transcendent ‘grace’ of ‘presentness’, time as an actual element of the minimalist work imbues it with the mundane, phenomenal, everyday quality of ‘presence’.

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71 Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, p. 15
72 Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, p. 16
In the decades since the publication of the ‘Art and Objecthood’ essay, Fried’s identification of theatricality, the knowing acknowledgement of a beholder, as a primary characteristic of minimal art has proven to be prescient. The theatricality of minimalism has been revealed as not an isolated occurrence, but an early and paradigmatic instance of a more general trend. Much of the post-minimal, performance, installation and new media art produced up until the present day displays such theatricality, and the acknowledgement of a subjective audience is now commonplace in contemporary art practice. Furthermore, works that would once have been tools of institutional critique, and stretched the definitions of art, have found their place in museums; the theatrical is now thoroughly institutionalised.

In light of this, it is significant but not altogether surprising that the trend can also be discerned in museums themselves. Contemporary exhibition design and modes of museum display, and contemporary installation art practice, have come to closely resemble one another. Minimalism’s concern with objecthood is a function of its hybridity, blurring the boundaries of art and life, and it is this same blurring between previously established boundaries – between art and history, museum and life – that is now also manifest in much contemporary museum display, and even more importantly for this dissertation, in museum architecture. I would argue that the fundamental museological shift from deathliness to liveliness, as postulated and argued throughout this thesis, could also be conceived as an increasing theatricalisation of museums. This theatricalisation of museums of all kinds is both embodied in and enacted by purpose-built museum architecture, and I will later demonstrate its emphasis on affect and the experience of the beholder, and its explicit address to the individual.

Fried writes that ‘[a]rt degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre. Theatre is the common denominator that binds a large and seemingly disparate variety of activities to one another, and which distinguishes those activities from the radically different enterprises of the modernist arts’. In Fried’s terms theatre is a catch-all. It dissolves and disperses art practice into an ever greater proliferation of media and method, a ‘large and seemingly disparate variety

of activities’ that can no longer be recognized as art under conventional definitions. Theatre causes the possibilities for art to explode ever outward, a project that is very different from ‘the enterprises of the modernist arts’, which are concerned with a constant movement inwards, towards what is essential in any single, distinct medium. And this is, significantly, very close to the role played by contemporary museum architecture: binding ‘a large and seemingly disparate variety of activities to one another’, it seems often enough that it is only the museum’s walls, or more pointedly the beholder’s experience of them, that holds together the huge range of objects, subjects, narratives, systems, and activities that the contemporary museum encompasses. What is most significant in this recognition of theatricality as an important characteristic of the new museum institution, as well as its architecture, are the implications (still in Friedian terms) this holds for objects. Perhaps most importantly, it demonstrates that a museum that places an emphasis on the human subject, on individual, temporal, phenomenal experience, does not necessarily entail the abandonment of objects and objecthood, but rather a perverse kind of valorisation of them. It is the specificity, the quality of being experienced over time and in space – the monumental presence – of such museum objects and museum architecture that guarantees their affect.

These, then, are the terms of Fried’s thesis: art, objecthood, theatricality (to which he later added its inverse term, ‘absorption’), audience, experience, situation, context, presence, and presentness. In spite of the fact that Fried’s contentions are arguable, it has been useful to draw upon some of these terms in the construction of the larger argument here, and I will return to his thesis again. Objecthood, the object character of the artwork or artefact, can be set up as a tool for examining museum objects, museum types, and museum architecture, and also for examining the subjective experience of these, in space and time. More than this, the conception of theatricality has clear parallels with, and significant implications for, the present situation of museums, the meaning and function of museum architecture, and the present crisis of the museum object.

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Throughout this chapter I have pursued the argument, both implicitly and explicitly, that the association between museum and mausoleum does not have to be negative, and I reiterate that here. There is nothing inherently wrong with cemeteries and mausoleums - they play an important ritual and functional role in housing the remains of the dead. They are sites where both public and private mourning takes place, and thus they allow the living to work through the trauma of absence, and maintain a meaningful connection with the past, through intangible memory and tangible monument. They also provide a reminder of individual mortality, the irreducible fact of the human condition. That cemeteries and mausoleums frequently have aesthetic and curiosity value is not insignificant, nor is the fact that they have been the source and setting of so much narrative.75

Comparisons between museums and cemeteries do not usually ascribe museums with an important role in allowing the individual and society to mourn the death of objects. Nor do they usually imply that museums provide a suitably protective and dignified receptacle for relics. Rather this comparison proposes that museums are sinister interlocutors between the realm of the living and that of the dead, that they belong in the latter, but make forays into the former to acquire 'living' objects, which are then dragged back across to the other side. In order to avoid 'killing' the object, it would presumably be necessary to remove the deathly effect of the institution's threshold, to make it permeable and diaphanous, easily crossed in either direction. This is what many museums have attempted in the postmodern period: to collect 'live' objects and to keep them 'alive' within the museum, to erect the museum not as separate to life but as permeated by it at every level.

So there is nothing inherently wrong with mausoleums. To criticise a cemetery for holding the remains of the dead would be foolish. To criticise a

75 As to the aesthetic value of cemeteries, Linda Nochlin describes the American rural cemeteries of the nineteenth century as 'outdoor sculpture museums'. She continues 'in many cases, in our country, the cemetery was the only place where "high art" was readily available'. See Nochlin, 'Museums and Radicals', note 40, p. 39.
mausoleum for killing people in order to fill its ranks would, however, be quite legitimate. Mausoleums, and by extension museums, appear to be acceptable if they stick with things that are already dead. Clearly I am exaggerating the point, but only to underscore the value system that underlies the analogy between museum and mausoleum. The very reason that cemeteries have been the setting for so much narrative fiction is their 'spookiness', their quality of being a liminal space of overlap between the realms of the living and the dead. The museum, too, has been represented in this way by popular culture. But it doesn't take much for spooky to tip into gloomy, melancholy to turn to dreary, and for frightening to fade into boring. Anyone who finds mausoleums pleasurable and entertaining places might be regarded as at best romantic and sentimental, and at worst suspiciously necrophiliac. The citizens of modern liberal democracies like their edification taken with rather less solemnity than the people of the past did. To restate the proposition, there is nothing inherently wrong with mausoleums, except when you're looking for fun.

THE EMBODIMENT OF THE CRISIS OF MUSEUMS
I have argued throughout this chapter that many museums today are working hard to displace their association with deathliness, replacing it with a rhetoric of life, fun, youth, relevance, interactivity and high technology. But the museum’s disavowal of deathliness can itself be seen as symptomatic; the gleaming reflective surfaces of the new museums represent an active denial of a fundamental relationship. The 'museum boom' of the 1980's and 90's gives the lie to the notion of the museum as a dead, or doomed, institution, but does not disprove the inherence of death within the institution itself.

But there is the possibility of a third way. I would argue that there is a particular genre of museum which, rather than working in opposition to the inherent deathliness of the institution, incorporates and even compounds such associations. This is only possible (and indeed bearable) because such museums present histories that are themselves aporias, caesuras, impossibilities, and that, most simply, deal with death itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in museums that present the specific and tragic fate of the victims of genocide. The popularity of such museums undoubtedly relies on postmodern museology and its aim to present
problems over progress, yet I would argue that there is also a logic internal to such museums – they deal both directly as well as indirectly with death, they take death itself as their subject.

Given that such museums concentrate specifically on 'impossible' histories, they both embody and problematise the postmodern crisis of representation. For museums to recognise and acknowledge their representational element is particularly appropriate, since in itself it echoes the gap between history as it is lived and history as it is written. Representation not only contains a temporal distance - it follows an earlier presentation - but it also contains a spatial dimension, the gap or unknowable space between. The distance between these two, and the repetition it involves, is necessary to re-calling, re-collecting and remembering the past. Historically, the museum failed to express or acknowledge the gap between presentation and representation, and the distortion that events, ideas or objects can undergo as they pass across it. It could be argued that it is the crossing of this gap that, like the River Styx, 'kills' museum artefacts. But objects remain rich sources of information, whether or not this is assumed to be 'objective', or 'evidence'.

The role of objects in impossible history museums is particularly complex, given that the events that they commemorate are frequently felt to 'defeat' representation, and the actual artefacts are often scarce or inadequate to the task of both representation and commemoration. In such museums, then, the trajectory of the modern museum is pursued into an exacerbation or exaggeration of everything the 'lively' museum seeks to suppress; it is precisely when the museum is 'ruined' in this way that it reaches its apotheosis.

CONCLUSION

The impossible history museum carries the institution to its logical conclusion, by expressing and embodying its crisis. The impossible history museum is a third way, which exists outside of any binary opposition between old and new, modern or postmodern systems of thought, by descending into the very end-condition of the museum tradition. I use the idea of embodiment quite deliberately here, since, as I will argue, the architecture of such museums literally objectifies and embodies their
particular historiographic and ideological approach. The inherent deathliness of the modern museum has passed out of artefacts and into the building itself - from museum contents to museum form.

This chapter has opened a new way of understanding the museum's turn away from the mausoleum as being equally a turn towards liveliness and theatricality. It has also opened the possibility that the deathly museum might have important functions and pleasures, and that such museums are not necessarily precluded from a certain paradoxical liveliness and popularity of their own. Likewise, it has revealed that liveliness, as equated with Friedian theatricality, does not preclude the presence of objects and objecthood, but may even be predicated on their presence. Overall, it has shown that what postmodern museum criticism has generally construed as a dichotomous relationship between the museum's traditional role as a vault, archive, or mausoleum, and its increasing role as a venue of entertainment, education, and fun, is in fact a complex and mutually imbricated dialectic. In the next chapter, the particular problems of the art museum, and the pointed critiques enacted both by art theorists and artists, serve to open out the question of the museum, its objects, and its architecture, more generally.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘Killing Art to Write its History’: Decontextualisation and the Avant-Garde

The history of twentieth-century art may someday appear to have been simply a death struggle with the museum.¹

Hugh Kenner

Only after art has in fact wholly detached itself from everything that is the praxis of life can two things be seen to make up the principle of development of art in bourgeois society: the progressive detachment of art from real life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of existence, i.e., the aesthetic.²

Peter Bürger

FIGURE 8: Human remains on display at the British Museum.
INTRODUCTION: THE MUSEUM AS PREDATOR

Throughout the museum's history, declarations that the institution is itself 'dead', finished, ruined, a spent and outdated force, have frequently been balanced by condemnations of its process of 'killing' objects, subjects, art and history in order to represent them. The argument hinges around two different conceptions of the museum – one as a benign institution which passively collects objects that have already died, as it were, of natural causes, and the other as a murderous institution that stalks and 'kills' objects, dragging them into its lair never to see the light of day again. In the first case, as discussed in the previous chapter, time is the destructive agent, while the museum has the melancholy task of picking over the ruins of history. In the other case, to be discussed in this chapter, it is the museum that acts as the agent of destruction. In the former case the museum would simply follow in the wake of historical events as birds follow the plough, while in the latter it would have a powerful role in the active construction of historical narratives through 'dead' objects.

The previous chapter was primarily concerned with the possibility of the museum as a *deathly* institution, that is to say as a vehicle for the mortification of culture. But there is another sphere of museum criticism that frames the museum as having a much more sinister function – as being an active predator rather than a scavenger. This body of criticism and critical practice regards the museum not as neutral, but rather as an instrument of power. Much of the critique is concentrated around the museum's processes of decontextualisation, whereby objects are taken from the lifeworld into the museum's realm, and is most fierce in its treatment of art museums, which provide 'the most elaborately articulated instance of decontextualisation as a strategy of power.'³ By making an exposition and account in this light, of some of the most vociferous critics in the institution's history, I am acknowledging that the art museum is a special case but also proposing that it represents an exaggeration of problems that exist in all museums.

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In the accounts collected here, it will become clear that the idea of the museum as an inherently deathly institution is more complex and potentially redemptive than its later detractors, as discussed previously, generally admit. While the deathliness of museums is integrally related to their decontextualisation of objects, the concept of autonomy provides a precedent where it might be seen to have been good, or indeed necessary, to decontextualise the object. In this conception, the path to ‘truth’ or the true criticism of social conditions would be realised through the decontextualisation of the museum’s objects. This is not to say that the idea of art as autonomous has been readily accepted by artists and art theorists, any more than the association between museum and mausoleum has. Indeed, the struggle against art’s separation and alienation from the world, as institutionalised by museums and museum decontextualisation, has been a defining component of the avant-garde project, as Peter Bürger points out. But it is only by working through these comprehensive critiques, enacted both discursively and in art practice, that it is possible to arrive at a more nuanced and dialectical understanding of the possibilities of the museum’s inherent deathliness, its decontextualisation and collection of objects, its enshrining of autonomy, and its potential for cultural criticism.

This chapter offers an exposition of key figures and accounts in the history of museum criticism, and it spans a broad chronology. Ranging from the work of the earliest critic of the modern museum, Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, it extends up until the later writings of Theodor Adorno. Both of these writers argue that art incarcerated in the museum is art at the service of the culture industry, deprived of its real ‘function’ in the world. F.T. Marinetti too, in his role as polemicist for the Italian Futurist movement, and exemplar of the iconoclastic stream of the historical avant-garde more generally, decried the museum’s enforced separation of art from life in the world. All of these authorities wrote within a recognisably modern period, they are concerned with the museum in its modern phase, and a clear theme emerges through their writings: the mortifying effect that museums have on art and artefacts through de- and re-contextualisation.

The chapter is structured into three parts. The first is an exposition of three seminal works of museum criticism by Quatremère de Quincy, Adorno, and Marinetti, all of which are concerned with the relationship between art, meaning,
and context. These works serve to reinforce the connection between museum and mausoleum, introduced in the previous chapter. But the question of the museum’s manipulation of meaning through a manipulation of context can also be approached from another direction, and the second part of the chapter re-examines these same questions through Bürgers’ Theory of the Avant-garde. Bürger argues that the historical avant-garde can be defined by its desire to reconcile art with life, to bridge the characteristically modern schism between the realm of art and that of the everyday. This can equally be framed as a struggle against notions of art as autonomous, and against the museum as it reinforces such notions. Bürger’s historicisation of autonomy, and his theory of the avant-garde, is relevant to all the three of the museo-critical texts in the first part of the chapter. But his theory also extends to the proposition of a neo-avant-garde, which can also be defined and distinguished by its comportment in relation to art’s autonomy, especially as it is reflected or inflected in museums.

The second part of the chapter discusses the ways in which critical art practice, and particularly the neo-avant-garde movement known as institutional critique, can be understood in light of Bürger’s theory. More than this, it points out the complexity and ambivalence of the avant-garde project, an ambivalence that stems from the double-edged concept of autonomy itself, and which is both compounded and revealed in the evident contradictions of the neo-avant-garde. The thesis questions whether, in light of Bürger’s findings, attempts to break down institutional barriers between art and life, and between the museum and the world, should be uncritically accepted. This is especially apposite given that, as the third part of the chapter finds, there is a significant parallel between the avant-garde project of breaching the museum’s walls, and the trend already noted in the ‘new museology’ – towards liveliness, openness, and contiguity with the everyday world. Throughout all this, context and autonomy are revealed as key, contentious, and continuous threads that can be traced throughout the history of museum criticism.

PART ONE: DECONTEXTUALISATION AND THE DEATH OF OBJECTS: ‘TO ATTEND OUR OWN FUNERAL WHILE WE ARE ALIVE’

It can be argued that the discourse of museum criticism emerged virtually simultaneously with the founding of the Louvre as the first modern public museum,
and it did so through the work of Quatremère de Quincy. He was not only the earliest, but also one of the most vociferous of all art museum critics – his work has been described by one scholar as 'the most perfect expression of museophobia in the history of ideas.' A leading art theorist, critic and academic working in Paris throughout the turbulent period of the French Revolution, Quatremère was to write two works of museum criticism, published nearly twenty years apart, which together elaborate a complex, politically engaged critique of the museum's decontextualisation and commodification of art. The first of these, published in 1796, was a series of seven open letters protesting the French army's despoiling actions in Italy, known as the Lettres à Miranda sur le déplacement des monuments de l'Art de l'Italie. Here Quatremère argues that to remove an artwork or monument from the context of its origin is to deprive it of its meaning, its educational function (in the training of artists), and its moral usefulness for the populace, both at the place from which it was taken, and where it is received. Drawing a distinction between a kind of 'natural' museum constituted by a place, for example the city of Rome, and an artificial museum like the Louvre which appropriates or steals objects from their rightful places in the world, he asserts that '[t]he country is itself the museum.' Here it is the living material world that is regarded as the ideal 'collection', where each object has an individual place within a larger cultural tableau, while the reified and ossified museum object is seen to exist in a kind of limbo.

4 Sherman, ‘Quatremere / Benjamin / Marx’, p. 124.
6 Sherman writes that he 'has long been recognized as both the leading art theorist of the era of the French Revolution and, in his role as perpetual secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, as perhaps the most doctrinaire exponent of academic neoclassicism after 1815... As the official in charge of the decorative program of the Pantheon... he had the opportunity to dispense considerable patronage; he was, in addition, an influential critic.' See Sherman, ‘Quatremere / Benjamin / Marx’, p. 126.
9 Interestingly enough, Quatremère comes very close here to articulating and arguing for the modern concept of heritage.
In these early writings, Quatremère’s opposition to museums stems from a fervent belief in art’s essential usefulness, its social function and edifying influence. These ideas were in keeping with the prevailing conservative beliefs of his era, and were in fact very close to the motivations that led to the Louvre collection being opened to the public in the first place. But Quatremère differed from his contemporaries in that he saw art’s usefulness being tied specifically to the phenomenal world – that is, to a particular place and time. In the correct circumstances, an artwork could fulfil its purpose, and take its natural place amongst the people. Those circumstances could never, according to Quatremère, be fulfilled inside a museum, especially not a museum in another country.

As Daniel Sherman has observed, in its conviction about the utility and function of art, Quatremère’s position bears marked commonalities with the Marxist notion of art’s use-value, later expounded by members of the Frankfurt School. For Quatremère, as for Benjamin and Adorno, the museum deprives art of its 'use-value' and replaces it with exhibition and exchange value. To tear an artwork from its proper context and then sell it would thus, for Quatremère, be the ultimate misappropriation of the purpose of art, and this, according to him, was what museums were also covertly engaged in. Of his later work of museum criticism, *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l’art*, published in 1815, Sherman writes that ‘[f]or Quatremère, any number of transactions, actual or implicit, can rob art of use value: production for sale, removal from their original context, or installation in a museum, which... he likens to a picture shop.’ By demonstrating that the art museum was complicit in the workings of the art market, even as it ostensibly stood 'above' all such transactions, Quatremère opened a debate that was to resonate throughout the history of museum criticism. Condemning museums as ‘receptacles of factitious ruins' at the end of the first section of the *Considérations*, Quatremère makes a ringing condemnation of the institution.

To displace all these monuments, to gather up in this way the decomposed fragments, to put the debris in a methodical order, and to make of such a gathering a practical course in modern chronology: this is, for a practical reason, to constitute ourselves as a dead nation; it is to attend our own

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10 Sherman, ‘Quatremere / Benjamin / Marx’, p. 132.
funeral while we are alive; it is to kill Art to write its history; but it is not its history, it is an epitaph.\textsuperscript{11}

In this passage, Quatremère makes a concise summary of several key arguments for the association between museum and mausoleum. First is the idea that to remove or 'displace' an artwork or object from its milieu is to rob it of meaning and value, and in an important sense to 'kill' it. Secondly, that the 'methodical' systems of order employed by museums are a kind of death in themselves, that the chaotic disorder of the 'decomposed fragments' of the world have a heterogenous vitality which is destroyed by rigid chronology and museum categorisation. The third point is Quatremère's argument that to decontextualise and order the 'debris' of the world is to 'constitute ourselves as a dead nation', to 'attend our funeral while we are still alive'. This is to say that the museum presents a vision of the nation as if it were already 'dead', an epitaph that Quatremère argues is premature. The museum, in his vision, projects a possible future when the nation really does lie in ruins, and the museum is all that remains to represent it. It thus constitutes the museum visitor as a kind of ghost, looking back from the future at the destruction of their own civilisation, attending their own 'funeral'.\textsuperscript{12}

In the context of revolutionary France, the idea that a national institution could even countenance the destruction of the nation seems strangely unpatriotic, and this is surely part of Quatremère's complaint. But more than this, his criticism centres on the museum as a summary or synopsis, as if the real and present nation was not enough, as if it needed the museum as a corrective, a neater, more ordered version of itself. Following a logic of teleology, the museum would only be finally 'completed' by the death of the nation itself, and it would thus wait and eagerly anticipate the time when the real nation is gone, and only the museum representation remains. In this reading the museum is like an open tomb, prepared


\textsuperscript{12} It is interesting to note that this is very close to Didier Maleuvre's position, as discussed in the previous chapter. But while the argument of these two theorists, separated by centuries, is pursued along almost identical lines, the conclusions they respectively draw are diametrically opposed. Maleuvre finds the museum's deathliness to be one of its principal positive attributes, whereas Quatremère sees it as a fatal flaw.
and waiting for the end of culture. But there is one other crucial point in the passage quoted above which warrants pursuit, and this is the relation between the museum and art history. In writing that art museums 'kill art to write its history', Quatremère constitutes the living realm of art as quite separate from art history in the museum. Art can only enter into the museum, and thus into history, if it is dead, fixed, finished and closed, severed from relationships in the world in preparation for canonisation. In Quatremère's conception, then, art museums kill art objects in order to write the specific and separate history of art.

The idea that art has a history that is distinct from wider events and trends in the social, political, and economic realms is enshrined in the art museum. It has often been noted that the discipline of art history and the institution of the art museum are mutually dependent. The art museum implies a conservative, even regressive reading of the history of art as a self-contained, cumulative progression, each 'masterpiece' building upon that which has gone before. Such a notion of the 'archive' has been examined by Foucault in 'Fantasia of the Library', where he analyses Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* as the first literary work created entirely from fragments of other texts, from within the bounds of the library.\(^{13}\) He finds the museum equivalent in Manet's *Olympia*, the first 'museum painting', an acknowledgement of 'the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums'.\(^{14}\)

For Foucault, the moment of Manet and Flaubert was the point at which the archive turned reflexively in upon itself, compounding its separation from the world: 'Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They both produced work in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings or texts... [t]hey erect their art within the archive.'\(^{15}\) In an important sense, the 'museum pieces' that Foucault identifies are actually created *by* the museum: the museum initiates a demand, which artists then fulfil. In Marxist rhetoric, such a relationship of supply and

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14 Foucault, 'Fantasia of the Library', p. 92.

15 Foucault, 'Fantasia of the Library', p. 92.
demand constitutes artworks as commodities, and thus the culture industry fulfils its own cyclic commodification of art.

The history of the art museum, then, traces the separation of art from life in the modern period. After a time, it was no longer necessary for the museum to decontextualise art, to take it from its place in the world. The influence of the museum was such that art began to be produced specifically for it, and this art (aside from being commodified) was always already decontextualised. The art museum was not only a self-supporting argument, but also a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to its own internal logic, it is not only acceptable, but entirely necessary for the art museum to decontextualise artworks. Foucault’s idea of the archive thus has far-reaching implications, since it also serves as a model for modern art itself, which is characterised by a turning away from the world and inward, towards a ‘formalist’ consideration of the object and medium in itself. The modern art object is a ‘homeless object’, deliberately displaced from the very moment of its creation. This represents a fundamental shift away from Quatremère’s idea that art has a usefulness, that it is an ordinary, organic, and integral part of human activity, tied up in the rituals and events of everyday life.

ARTWORKS AND ARTEFACTS

In spite of Quatremère’s complaints, of course, the museum went on to become a powerful and pervasive cultural institution, in France as elsewhere. The model that he pre-emptively objected to, including its decontextualisation of objects, continued onwards. In ‘collecting’ artworks from the social, cultural and political conditions of their production, this museum underscores the idea that art does not rely on context in order to have meaning. This is an important way in which museums have traditionally distinguished between artworks and artefacts – through their relative reliance on and comportment in relation to context. The meaning of an artwork is held by some to be absolute, the work to be self-contained and self-explanatory, both having a meaning and communicating that meaning irrespective of its context. The meaning of the artefact, on the other hand, is often held to be relative and contingent, able to be ‘deciphered’, particularly through recourse to the conditions in which the object was made and used. Leaving aside the accuracy or rightness of these conceptions (whilst still noting that they reinforce the idea of art and artefact
as mutually exclusive), they are interesting for what they say about the processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation practiced by museums.

Art museums are commonly regarded as the ‘highest’ form of museum, not only because they contain the ‘highest’ form of culture, but also because they enshrine this in a correspondingly abstract, disengaged, transcendent type of space. The common mythology of art museums holds that they demand a building that is also high art, both to reflect and celebrate the preciousness, uniqueness, and especially the autonomy of their contents. If art is thought to exist in a privileged realm ‘above’ the petty transactions of the everyday, then the idea that an art museum building should do the same, and indeed that it should ‘transcend’ other types of architecture, is a logical extension. Whether or not these ideas are supportable, they are powerful and pervasive, and have been partly responsible for the notion of the art museum as a place consecrated to the glorification and worship of a transcendent ideal.

It is this separate, ‘higher’ realm, a neutral space divorced from pragmatic functionalism and thus conducive to unmediated aesthetic experience, that the art museum was designed to embody. This realm also has an inherent historicity as a cultural form – according to its logic there can be no art without art history. It thereby ascribes art with two simultaneous, and apparently contradictory, modes of temporality: on one level art history constitutes itself as a continuous progression or evolution over time, whereby no art work could exist if it wasn’t for the works which came before it. At the same time, however, the individual work is presented as being ahistorical, transcending the material circumstances of its production and display, and projecting aesthetic value as an absolute quality that can be measured across the entire history of art.

In light of all this, it is not surprising that Quatremère wrote so fiercely in opposition to the museum as it was dawning in his time – his was a dated conception of art, soon to be superseded by a triumphant modernism. The important point for the present thesis, though, is that Quatremère’s argument remained an undercurrent in the intervening period, surfacing occasionally, until it finally re-emerged, stronger than ever, within the postmodern critique of institutions. This discourse has consistently advocated and attempted the re-contextualisation of art and of artefacts, the ‘opening’ of museums, and the re-connection of art with
life. I will return this later in the chapter. But it can also be said that, in an important sense, the ‘museum pieces’ that Foucault identifies are actually created by the museum: the museum initiates a demand, which artists then fulfil, and the artwork bypasses its life in the world altogether. It was in opposition to this apparent debasement of art into the false, commodified product of a self-serving culture industry that Theodor Adorno developed his critique of museums.

‘THE FAMILY SEPULCHRES OF WORKS OF ART’

The spirit and the sense of Quatremère’s early museum criticism was echoed a century and a half later, when Adorno opened his essay ‘Valéry Proust Museum’ with the famous observation that I have already quoted,

> The German word ‘museum’ ['museumlike'], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralisation of culture. Art treasures are hoarded in them, and their market value leaves no room for the pleasure of looking at them.\(^{16}\)

Here we see a variation on Quatremère’s ideas that the ‘life’ of artworks is constituted by their ‘vital relationships’ with people, and that such relationships can not occur in the museum. There is an ambiguity in the passage, though, around the question of whether objects are retired to the museum, so to speak, when they are already ‘in the process of dying’, or whether they begin to die there only after, and because of, their incarceration. The idea that museums ‘testify to the neutralisation of culture’ would seem to imply the latter - that artworks which have the potential to be contentious or challenging in the everyday world are rendered powerless when placed in museums. This idea has continued to find much currency with artists and critics up to the present day, and has been the motivation for some of the more explosive incursions against the museum in the modern period.

But the idea that museum objects are preserved because of ‘historical respect’, rather than out of concern for the ‘needs of the present’, would seem to suggest the opposite. If museums are indeed ‘the family sepulchres of works of art’,

\(^{16}\) Adorno, ‘Valéry Proust Museum’, p.175.
then the preservation of historical artworks is entirely reliant on the often begrudging dutifulness of the heir. Here Adorno touches upon the idea that ‘historical respect’ can be more of an oppressive weight than an inspiration. The last sentence in Adorno’s passage is also clearly Marxist in influence – works collected in museums are condemned not only to be dead, neutralised, and oppressed, but commodified as well.

Adorno’s essay is structured around a comparison and contrast between two loosely contemporaneous accounts of museums in the early modern period: Valéry's essay 'Le problème des musées', and a passage from the third volume of *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* by Marcel Proust. Adorno does not give full citation details but states that the Valéry text is excerpted from the volume of essays *Pièces sur l’art*. It is a challenge, in making an exposition of Adorno's essay, to keep these three voices and arguments distinct, however it is worth attempting here for the light that it throws on three important voices in museum criticism.

In Adorno’s account, Valéry's position is defined in opposition to the ‘confusing overabundance’ of the Louvre: ‘[c]old confusion, he says, reigns among the sculptures, a tumult of frozen creatures each of which demands the non-existence of the others, disorder strangely organized. Valéry's misgivings about 'over accumulation', and the proximity of incompatible works in the museum, is also directed at the specific modes of behaviour that it enforces, and the motivations that draw people there. As Adorno writes,

Standing among the pictures offered for contemplation, Valéry mockingly observes that one is seized by a sacred awe; conversation is louder than in church, softer than in real life. One does not know why one has come - in search of culture or enjoyment, in fulfilment of an obligation, in obedience to a convention. Fatigue and barbarism converge. Neither a hedonistic nor a rationalistic civilisation could have constructed a house of such disparities. Dead visions are entombed there.

Throughout this passage we see the idea of the museum as a heterotopia with its own modes of behaviour and comportment, and also a complex sense of obligation. This idea is present throughout the history of museum criticism, and

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17 Adorno does not give full citation details but states that the Valéry text is excerpted from the volume of essays *Pièces sur l’art*.
endures into the present day. But the last line is particularly interesting for the present argument, in that it introduces the possibility of the deathliness of the art museum being a function of its contents – the deathliness within works of art themselves – as much as its institutional form. The idea of a ‘dead vision’ – the vision of a dead artist, the art of a dead visionary, or a vision which is itself dead – implies an art which has outlived itself, where the window of understanding between artist, artwork, and audience has, with time, moved irrevocably out of alignment. But more than this, the passage opens the possibility that there may be some critical value in art’s ‘deadness’ as such. A related idea has been postulated by Hilde Heynen, through her reading of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: namely in the interpenetration she finds there between mimesis, autonomy, and critique. These ideas will emerge as crucial to the larger argument later, and I will return to Heynen’s reading of Adorno in greater depth. But it is enough here to touch upon the idea that the critical function of autonomous art might be related to its incorporation or mimesis of its own opposite, even of its own ‘death principle’. She writes that, in Adorno’s theory,

In order to carry out a genuine critique, it is necessary for works of art to identify to a certain extent with what they are in revolt against. This notion can be seen, for instance, in a passage in which Adorno states that works of art are in a certain sense allied to the death principle. Because they remove that which they objectify for the immediacy of life, they submit by way of mimesis to reification, which, as a realization of instrumental thought, nevertheless constitutes their own death principle.\(^{20}\)

Returning to the essay at hand, Adorno locates the essential distinction between his two subjects in the question of duration. For Valéry ‘the criterion of duration is the here and now, the present moment... [A]rt is lost when it has relinquished its place in the immediacy of life, in its functional context; for him the ultimate question is that of the possible use of the work of art.’\(^{21}\) For Valéry, then, the immediacy of the work is lost when it is relocated into the museum, and there jostled and ‘neutralised’ by other works. Adorno characterises Proust, on the other hand, as having the deliberately childlike perception of the amateur, and a pronounced


sensitivity to the evocative and transformative effects of memory. Proust cultivates a naive sensibility whereby the artwork is revealed anew, into a new immediacy, every time it is experienced, and this is possible precisely because the 'living intention' of the work has died. In other words Valéry is concerned with the life of the work, while Proust is concerned with its afterlife. They agree, crucially, that artworks 'die' in the museum, but disagree on whether this ultimately has a destructive or generative effect. As Adorno writes,

In the artifact's capacity for disintegration Proust sees its similarity to natural beauty. He recognizes the physiognomy of decomposing things as that of their second life. Because nothing has substance for him but what has already been mediated by memory, his love dwells on the second life, the life which is already over, rather than the first. ... Valéry takes offence at the chaotic aspect of the museum because it distorts the works' expressive realization; for Proust this chaos assumes tragic character. For him it is only the death of the work of art in the museum which brings it to life. When severed from the living order in which it functioned, according to him, its true spontaneity is released - its uniqueness, its 'name', that which makes the great works of culture more than culture.22

Adorno argues that Proust's attitude is only possible because of the aesthetic distance that he cultivates; his is the distance of the spectator rather than the closeness of the practitioner.23 This distance also marks the space necessary for aesthetic pleasure (Kunstgenuss) - the spectator's (or dilettante's) capacity for pleasure in a work is the inverse of the artist's complete familiarity with it, and this is partly why '[t]he amateur is incomparably more comfortable in the museum than is the expert.'24 The distinction between Proust's naive appreciation of museums and Valéry's mistrust thus centres, in Adorno's account, around the subjective relationship between the museified art object and the perceiving subject. While Valéry is dedicated to the 'objective character' of the work, its 'immanent coherence ... in contrast to the contingency of the subject',25 for Proust 'works of art are always

22 Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', p.182.
23 As one who is 'a spectator even in life', Proust is 'an admiring consumer, an amateur, inclined to that effusive and for artists highly suspect awe before works that characterizes only those separated from them as though by an abyss.' Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', p.180.
part of the life of the person who observes them.\textsuperscript{26} Thus while Valéry accuses the museum of 'killing' the artwork by compromising its integrity and 'objectivity', Proust's pleasure in the museum arises precisely from the work's dying and being 're-born' in the eyes of the subject.

And this is where the centrality of Adorno's essay to the present argument becomes clear. Adorno reads these ultimately opposed conceptions of art and its purpose - on the one hand existing purely for itself, and on the other hand existing for 'human ends' - as reflecting a fundamental opposition within the museum itself. The two accounts are thus complementary in that they reveal the oscillation between subject and object, liveliness and deathliness, which I have previously argued to be inherent to the museum apparatus. The two positions are locked together in a dialectical pair. In Adorno's conception neither is 'right', and nor is a reconciliation between them possible, but 'each takes the part of one moment in a truth which lies in the unfolding of contradiction.'\textsuperscript{27} He continues,

The fetishism of the object and the subject's infatuation with itself find their correctives in each other. Each position passes over into the other. Valéry becomes aware of the intrinsic being of the work through unremitting self-reflection, and, inversely, Proust's subjectivism looks to art for the ideal, the salvation of the living... Proust holds onto culture for the sake of objective happiness, whereas Valéry's loyalty to the objective demands of the work forces him to give up culture for lost.\textsuperscript{28}

In the latter half of his essay, then, Adorno elucidates an equivocal attitude towards art museums that is at odds with the tone of its opening sentences, where the connection between museum and mausoleum is presented as something 'unpleasant'. While its opening passage seems to concur with the general position of Quatremère de Quincy, by the end of the essay Adorno takes the opposite position, arguing that '[w]orks of art can fully embody the promesse du bonheur only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction.'\textsuperscript{29} Having begun with the assertion that museums

\textsuperscript{26} Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', p.181.
\textsuperscript{27} Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', p.183.
\textsuperscript{28} Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', p.183.
\textsuperscript{29} Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', p.185.
are places where 'we put the art of the past to death,\textsuperscript{30} Adorno ends with the idea that '[t]he natural-history collections of the spirit have actually transformed works of art into the hieroglyphics of history and brought them to a new content while the old one shrivelled up.\textsuperscript{31}

Significantly, what has shifted between the beginning and end of the essay is not the idea of the fundamental association between museum and mausoleum, but a conception of the potential benefit of this association. It is precisely because of the deathliness of museums, and their mortifying effects, that outdated works of art can enter a second life. This afterlife of the artwork is fundamentally different from its life in the world: it entails a different temporality and a different relationship with the observer, it ascribes and solidifies the work’s place in the canon, and dictates its position and significance to art history. Crucially, though, Adorno concludes that this afterlife is no better and no worse than the artwork’s time in general circulation, it is simply another stage.

'Valéry Proust Museum' resonates with the melancholy inheritance of destruction within redemption, and the annihilating effects of time, which are both ideas that were profoundly articulated by Adorno’s colleague Walter Benjamin, and I have already discussed some of these ideas in the previous chapter. In Adorno’s presentation of Proust, the idea that '[i]n the artifact’s capacity for disintegration Proust sees its similarity to natural beauty’, and further that ‘he recognizes the physiognomy of decomposing things as that of their second life’,\textsuperscript{32} both bear a striking resemblance to Benjamin’s vision of ruins as allegories of history, explicated in his study of German tragic drama. I will return to this idea in much greater depth in chapter six, but it is sufficient here to invoke Benjamin and note the connection between his ideas and those of Proust, particularly in relation to the power of involuntary memory to reinvigorate the past, to make it, as it were, live again.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} Adorno, ‘Valery Proust Museum’, p.177.
\textsuperscript{31} Adorno, ‘Valery Proust Museum’, p.185.
\textsuperscript{32} Adorno, ‘Valery Proust Museum’, p.182.
\textsuperscript{33} There is also a further connection here between the potency of involuntary memory and Alois Riegl’s idea of the unintentional monument – that which serves to recall memory, but only incidentally, and not because it has been deliberately set up to do so as in the case of
The idea that only what has died can be resurrected, and only that which has assumed a 'mortified' form can be collected, is partly the reason that Adorno's essay is so important to my argument here. I want to examine the possibility of reversing a value system that has come, falsely, to see the museum's deathliness as negative, and uncomplicated. Another reason why Adorno's essay is significant to my larger argument is his contention that the distinction between Valéry and Proust's accounts lies in their respective emphases on the art object and the perceiving subject. The status of the art object in the museum presents a particular conundrum that has continued to be explored throughout the modern and postmodern periods, and it remains, as this thesis would argue, a central question. Extending this argument to encompass the status of the artefact, the museum object that is not art, will be part of the aim of later chapters. The status of the architectural object, that is the museum building itself, is also intimately bound up with this debate.

The question of duration in art, examined by Adorno through Valéry, who in turn derived it from Henri Bergson, is also central to an understanding of museum art and museum objects more generally. The truth of whether art 'lives' at the time of its creation, its reception, or its placement in the museum, is a philosophical debate beyond the scope of this work. But if museums can be said to be concerned with one aspect of the world over all others, it is surely temporality, duration, and particularly the manipulation of 'tense' - past, present and future. It was the art museum's imposition of the past tense over the present that Marinetti, also influenced by concepts of temporality purportedly derived from Bergson, most decried.34

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ON THE OBJECT OF THE MUSEUM AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

‘TURN THE CANALS AND FLOOD THE VAULTS OF MUSEUMS!’

Marinetti, spokesman for the Italian Futurists and leader of their rebellion against tradition and history as a source for art, provides an exemplar of a more general animosity held towards museums by the aesthetic avant-garde. The futurists saw in museums a cult of the past, and expressed in a series of manifestoes their ‘disgust’ for the ‘fanatical worship of all that is old and worm-eaten.’35 Part of their complaint follows the same line as that of Valéry discussed above - they despise the museum's incongruous juxtaposition of artworks that are fundamentally antithetical.

Museums, cemetaries! ... Identical truly, in the sinister promiscuousness of so many objects unknown to each other. Public dormitories, where one is forever slumbering beside hated or unknown beings. Reciprocal ferocity of painters and sculptors murdering each other with blows of form and color in the same museum.36

But rather than running parallel to Valéry's idea that museums compromise the integrity of the individual artwork, the Futurists have a goal in mind that has less to do with the artwork and more to do with process, with the artist's life as or in art. In this conception, museum visiting is a form of 'poison' to the young artist, one that can only cause 'decay'. In Marinetti's manifesto this is contrasted with the violence and vitality of the Futurist ideals of energy, aggression, speed, and militarism.37 Marinetti makes an explicit connection between museum and mausoleum when he writes that the Futurist's goal is to 'free Italy from ... numberless museums which cover her with countless cemeteries.'38 While it is acceptable to visit museums once a year, 'as one visits the grave of dead relatives,39 they are really places for the dying, invalids, and prisoners, not for the young, strong, and 'living'.40

There is a binary opposition at play here: the Futurist dedication to the sound and fury of the instantaneous, fleeting moment of lived experience is pitted against the apparently unchanging, silent and funereal space-time of the museum,

conceived as a mere archive of 'old pictures'. Such a conception implies not only that the museum is irrelevant and outdated, but that it actually encroaches upon and stifles life and creativity in the present, preventing a direct and spontaneous engagement with the 'now'. The work of the 'old masters' is more impediment than inspiration. History must therefore be violently shrugged off before the artist can emerge into the present and produce the new art that modernity demands. In this 'kill or be killed' situation the Futurists see only one possible solution - the museum must be destroyed. Accordingly, in a fit of ecstatic iconoclasm Marinetti exhorts his fellow artists to 'set fire to the bookshelves!...Turn the canals and flood the vaults of museums!...Oh! Let the glorious old pictures float adrift! Seize pickaxe and hammer!'41

Marinetti’s rebellion against the museum’s accumulation of history has been repeated by countless others since, each with a common vision of the museum not as a storehouse of techniques and ideas, but as a crushing weight.42 The fact that the museum is already full, that it is replete with the work of dead artists, seems to condemn artists in the present to the role of epigone - always following another's lead, and thus, in an era that places an absolute value on originality, always inferior to that historical other.43 In this conception the museum makes an avant-garde position literally impossible – it consigns all artists in the present to a rearguard position by simple chronology. Neither is it enough for the

42 Didier Maleuvre has noted that this attitude towards the past is itself a marker of a modernist world view, far removed from an earlier, 'tradition-based world' in which 'ancestors were an auspicious, benign presence.' Citing Marx's dictum that 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like nightmare on the brain of the living,' he notes that 'The past now hangs over the present like a censorial threat. For such a conflict to arise, a wedge must have driven itself between past and present. A walk through the museum does not bring one closer to the ancestors; instead it so estranges one from them that they appear hostile to one's existence.' This surely the basis of Marinetti's impulse as well - not simply antagonism towards the past, but an instinct for self-preservation in the face of the threat of being buried alive under history. See Maleuvre, Museum Memories, p. 265. Karl Marx quote from "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx: Selected Writings, ed David MacLellan, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, p. 300
43 See Maleuvre, Museum Memories, p. 268: 'This [the museum] is not the utopian vision of a place where the whole of history stands at attention, but rather the awesome image of riotous legions of historical objects trampling over the living. In the museum, history condenses into a crushing authority. There the historical subject suffers the epigone's fate. The historical stock is replete from the start... I am left with no option but to wither away in the shadow of a fulfilled past.'
Futurists to simply ignore the museum, and the history of art – they see that it must be actively worked against, if not violently destroyed.

Following two disastrous world wars, and the discrediting of the Futurists' proto-fascist stance, artists in the later modern period have generally become less militant and more subversive in their attacks on the museum's stronghold. They have tended to direct their attention towards the museum's particular processes of representing and framing art history and notions of authenticity. Nevertheless, avant-garde artists in the twentieth century have drawn a general opposition between their own practice, springing from the present and directed to the future, and the museum as a lagging millstone.44 Marinetti's famous statement that a racing car 'adorned with great pipes like serpents with explosive breath' is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace is simply the bluntest statement of a position that is fundamentally opposed to the ideals of museums.45 And this is the point at which the concerns of the first and second parts of this chapter can be hinged. If Marinetti can be taken as an exemplar of the historical avant-garde, in all its rebellious and iconoclastic zeal, then his opposition is not only to museums, but to the idea of art as separate and indeed alienated from life praxis in the present. An opposition to decontextualisation, the ways in which art museums 'kill' art to write its history, can thus be recast as an opposition not only to the museum, but to the museum as it institutionalises and concretises autonomous art.

44 This valorisation of experience in the present over historical knowledge is echoed in Fredrick Nietzsche's 'On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life'. Nietzsche, writing about the education of the 'young man', writes that '[t]he uniform canon is that the young man has to start with a knowledge of culture, not even with a knowledge of life and even less with life and experience itself. And this knowledge of culture is instilled into the youth in the form of historical knowledge; that is to say, his head is crammed with a tremendous number of ideas derived from a highly indirect knowledge of past ages and peoples, not from direct observation of life... It is exactly the same crazy method as that which leads our young painters into picture galleries instead of into the workshop of a master and before all into the unique workshop of the unique master, nature. As though one could appropriate the arts and the sciences of past times, the actual yield of their life's experiences, by taking a fleeting stroll through the gallery of history!' Frederick Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in Untimely Meditations, Gordon Press, New York, 1974, p. 118. Quoted by Llewellyn Negrin, 'On the Museum's Ruins: A Critical Appraisal', Theory, Culture & Society vol. 10, 1993, p. 106.

PART TWO: THE AVANT-GARDE STRUGGLE AGAINST AUTONOMY

First it is necessary to clear up a possible misconception. In the first part of the chapter the principal term was decontextualisation, and the meaning that an artwork or artefact takes from the conditions of its creation or display. Art museums were found to decontextualise objects in a way that some critics found problematic. The key term in the second part of the chapter will be autonomy. But I am not implying here that art’s autonomy is comprised of a simple physical removal from its place in the world, that is to say I am certainly not equating decontextualisation directly with autonomy, since this would constitute an empty formalism. It would also be a gross oversimplification to say that art could be made autonomous simply through its being taken out of its milieu, and even worse to say that the museum’s decontextualisation might automatically have this function. This is not to discount the possibility that the museum’s mortificatory effects might not have some other utility, that the museum’s decontextualisation might allow an object to take up an afterlife, and a new meaning, in the institution. This would not necessarily be the same as autonomy, but the two terms are, nevertheless, related. And in the literature an attack on the museum’s decontextualisation of art often fades into or out of an attack on the autonomy of that art.

In these terms, Quatremère and Marinetti attack the art museum because (to their eyes) it enshrines and glorifies the alienation of art from life, an alienation that is also a principal feature of autonomous art. Adorno, on the other hand, complains about the museum for exactly the opposite reasons – not because it enshrines autonomy, but because it engulfs and neutralises it. Quatremère argues against the museum because he believes neither in the dawning autonomy of art, nor in its institutionalisation in the museum. He holds instead to an idea of art’s embeddedness in social life. Marinetti argues that the primacy and agency of the artist – one might even say the autonomy of the artist – is the key to art’s reconnection with life, and that the museum interferes with this process. Adorno would most likely dismiss the former position as the product of a naïve, cultic understanding of art, and the latter as a mythicised valorisation of the artist as genius. But there is, nevertheless, some common ground between the three positions. For very different reasons, and in different ways, each would seek to restore art to the world. Quatremère would seek to return art to its rightful spatio-
temporal position and situation, Marinetti would seek to engage art as an affirmation of life, speed and fury in the present moment, and Adorno would seek to free art from the museum so it could also be free of the contingencies of social and political life, and thus turn back towards the world in negative critique.

So the museum’s relationship with the autonomy of art is complex, and much less straightforward than many critics would tend to suggest. The question of whether the museum itself might have something like autonomy, on an institutional and crucially also an architectural level, is also complex, and will be left until later in the dissertation.

In general parlance, autonomy is usually understood to mean freedom, the ability of an emancipated agent or body to act under its own direction, rather than being ruled from elsewhere, or according to other, non-immanent determinations. Importantly, though, it also has the implication of separation, of a thing that is self-contained and complete in itself. There is also a spatial dimension to this, of a realm that is outlying or independent. All of these implications remain in the conception of autonomous art as articulated by Bürger: an art that is self-governing, as it were. Bürger derives his theory of the avant-garde, and in particular his conception of the role of autonomy within it, from Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, which will be a key reference point for the next chapter. Bürger’s emphasis on the historical specificity of the origin of autonomous art differs from Adorno’s account, but allows the thesis to approach Adorno, as it were, in reverse. Adorno’s concept of a negative dialectic between art and life, and his more nuanced theory of the social utility of autonomous art, can thus be examined more closely later.

**BÜRGER’S THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE**

According to both Bürger and Adorno, the autonomy of art is historically determined, coming about through the separation of art from its magical or cultic origins – its ‘disenchantment’ – equally as it was separated from pragmatic functions in religious, courtly, or everyday life. The autonomy of art also entails a separation from the function of entertainment. In short, artworks became
autonomous by negating their own historical origins: as Adorno writes, ‘art retrospectively annihilated that from which it emerged.’\(^{46}\)

This separation was certainly a product of the historical conditions of the moment, and doubtless had many and complex causes and effects, but there are two that will principally concern me here. The first is that the aesthetic came to be seen as a realm separate from the empirical world, and that aesthetic experience came to be a special category of experience.\(^{47}\) The second was the inauguration of the art museum in its modern form, and thus the isolation and institutionalisation of art as a special category of human endeavour, distinct from natural history, anthropology, and even a broader conception of history itself, as these are constructed in and by museums. In Bürger’s theory, the historical avant-garde was specifically, and polemically, opposed to both of these moments. It is clear that the two are interrelated, that the art museum functions as both the alibi and to a certain extent also the enforcer of art’s alienation from the world, and its ‘confinement in an ideal realm’.\(^{48}\) It is little wonder, then, that the avant-garde directed much of its ire against the museum, as the tangible, physical, and indeed architectural symbol of art’s separation from life.

But here too there is a contradiction – Bürger argues that it was at just the historical moment when art came to be seen, understood, and appreciated for its own sake, and the project of the historical avant-garde even became possible, that its separation from life praxis also rendered art irrelevant. The avant-garde thus struggles against the conditions that made it possible at all, and is defined by that which it set out to destroy – which includes the museum. As Bürger writes,

The avant-garde turns against both – the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy. Only after art, in nineteenth-century Aesthetics, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop “purely”. But the other side of autonomy, art’s lack of social impact, also becomes recognizable. The avant-gardist protest,


\(^{48}\) Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 50.
whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences.\textsuperscript{49} The implications of this moment of schism, the splintering of art from life, continue to resonate to the present day in the discourse and practice of both art and museums. To trace some of these implications across the intervening years is to trace the history of museum criticism, along with the history of the avant- and neo-avant-gardes. For this reason, it is possible and fruitful to return to the works of museum criticism by Quatremère and Marinetti discussed in the first half of the chapter, and to examine how they fit within Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde and critique art’s autonomy as much as they decry its decontextualisation. From there it is only a small step onwards to the neo-avant-garde, the next phase of museum criticism as proposed by Bürger. The genre of art known as institutional critique, which takes the museum as its specific subject, is in many ways the apogee of this trajectory, the self-conscious apotheosis of the neo-avant-garde, and a convincing proof of Bürger’s theory.

\textbf{RE-VIEWING DECONTEXTUALISATION THROUGH AUTONOMY}
Quatremère lived and wrote at a time when the French revolution, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the constitution of the modern museum as such also saw the divergence of the aesthetic into a distinct realm. His opposition to this movement is based upon a pre-modern and pre-avant-garde, contextual and organic conception of art: the idea that art’s meaning and social utility is directly grounded in the place and society where it was made. Quatremère thus opposes autonomy before the fact, as it were; his anthropological understanding of art’s role – an art thoroughly immersed in the society and culture that produced it, and which also derives its meaning and value from its location within that milieu – is the model from which a significant strand of art practice was at that very time departing. As Richard Wolin writes, ‘[t]he expression ‘autonomous art’ serves to distinguish the relationship in which modernism stands vis-à-vis the social matrix from which it emanates as

\textsuperscript{49} Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, p. 22.
opposed to the more integrated relation of traditional works of art.\textsuperscript{50} As art became gradually detached from social praxis it was also progressively ‘decontextualised’ in the general movement towards secular rationalism.

Quatremère’s position on autonomy, such as it can be inferred, is particularly interesting because he focuses less on artworks from his own period – which may perhaps be expected to be responding to the rise of museums with a certain inbuilt autonomy – than on ancient ruins and artworks collected from where they had lain for centuries. The fact that these works could be integrated within a new concept of the art museum and art history evidences not only the novel idea of an art museum as representing the specific and independent history of art, with specimens from every period, but that this new aestheticism also worked retrospectively. Even if the art of ancient Greece and Rome had been conceived by its makers as embedded within social life, and having a specific function and meaning there, this could all be swept away by an aestheticising eye that saw all art of all times as united in its occupation of a ‘higher’, autonomous realm. Quatremère’s complaint thus intertwines his opposition to the decontextualisation of art, and the idea of art’s autonomy, and both of these as they are symbolised by the art museum, and its ‘killing art to write its history’. Given all of this, Quatremère’s position also opens another fundamental question, and there is a clue in his writings to another, more satisfactory possibility.

In writing that ‘[t]he country is itself the museum’,\textsuperscript{51} Quatremère argues not only that artworks have a utility and meaning embedded in their specific spatio-temporal location, but that they can only be understood in a continuum with other, non-art practices and products of their particular culture. To put this another way, art and aesthetic experience must be understood within a framework of anthropology or ethnology, rather than art history. For the sake of argument, then, it is possible to imagine that there might be a museum that would be more satisfactory to Quatremère, if it placed art in a context that was both more broad


and more deep than the specific history of art. The significance of this speculation
is not what it says about Quatremère, but its proposition of another way in which art
might be understood and framed by museums.

In the dominant model of the art museum, the very model against which
Quatremère railed, art is the only category of object on display. But this stands in
marked contrast with other genres of museum, which paint a much more
heterogenous picture of human culture, and contain all manner of artefacts both
‘high’ and ‘low’. To place art in such a continuum, with other products and
manifestations of human culture, would mean a refusal of the claims of art to
transcendence. It would mean an understanding of art as simply one category of
human endeavour amongst many others, and an understanding of the individual
artwork not as self-contained, but as ensnared in a contextual web of actual
influences and situations and contingencies. It would mean an understanding of art
as an embedded anthropological artefact. But if it is true that Quatremère opposes
art’s autonomy before the fact, then Marinetti and his fellow artists erect their
opposition to autonomy with the full fury of the avant-garde’s desire to reframe art
within life.

Marinetti’s fierce polemic against museums can be read as a direct
expression of the avant-garde’s attack on the status of art, and of its
institutionalisation, in bourgeois society. His desire for the reconciliation of art and
life is a paean to the primacy of experience, of life in the present as itself art; in
Bürger’s terms this can be seen as an ‘attempt to organize a new life praxis from a
basis in art’. It is also clear from Marinetti’s writings that he does not object to the
art of preceding periods on stylistic grounds, it is not what the art in museums
represents, but what is represented by art in museums per se that is his concern:
namely the way that art functions, or in museums has ceased to function, in
society. As Bürger writes,

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the
status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of
art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis
of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once
again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially

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52 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 49.
significant. ... Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.\textsuperscript{53}

All of these contentions can be argued to be true of Marinetti. His objection to the autonomy of art is enacted on a structural level, and for this reason his attack on museums is less because they decontextualise existing art, than that they interfere with an unmediated relationship between art and life. In these terms, Marinetti would be opposed to ‘museum pieces’, those works produced within the modern period specifically for display in the museum, not because of a particular style or subject, but because such works are never intended to take up a life in the world at all. But what Marinetti did not see, in his violently iconoclastic zeal, was that a more subversive critique could be undertaken from within the institution itself. It was left to the neo-avant-garde, and particularly the branch concerned specifically with ‘institutional critique’, to reinvent the ‘museum piece’ and fulfil its critical potential.

\textbf{THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE AND INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE}

Bürger argues that after the failure or dissolution of the avant-garde project, as emblematised by the inability of artists like Marinetti to actually and successfully reconcile art with life, there came a subsequent, identifiable neo-avant-garde. This neo-avant-garde was very much conditioned by the experiments that had preceded it – its artists could not ignore the avant-garde’s attempts to break down art’s autonomy, but neither could they ignore the continuing fact of this autonomy. In Bürger’s terms the neo-avant-garde were, amongst other things, engaged in a critique of the ways in which the historical avant-garde had been progressively institutionalised – the proof of the failure of its project.

In Bürger’s account, the neo-avant-garde were placed in a difficult position as regards the social utility of art – they could no longer proceed as though art could be truly engaged in social life, since the autonomy of art had proven intractable. Instead they were obliged to take art’s autonomy as a given, to either accept it and move on in the knowledge of art’s detachment from empirical reality, or to take the autonomy of autonomy itself as their subject. For this reason, much

\textsuperscript{53} Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 49.
of the work of the neo-avant-garde was concerned with the framing conditions of art itself, the ways in which art is defined, constructed, and given value by what Bürger calls the institution of art – the entirety of its structures of production, reception, and evaluation. Rather than fleeing the museum, then, neo-avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Fred Wilson have enacted their subversive critique from within the institution itself, exploring and questioning its authorisation of art’s autonomy, but without expecting thereby to be directly engaged in the praxis of life. Bürger writes that, ‘without surrendering its claim to truth, art cannot simply deny the autonomy status and pretend that it has a direct effect’.54 The art of the neo-avant-garde thus self-consciously takes account of its own status and position in relation to the institution, and autonomy, of art.

Bürger’s thesis is borne out by the preoccupation, in the work of many artists from the 1960’s onwards, with the way in which art is framed and defined by the museum context. It is possible to see the attacks on the museum actually turning inside out – if Marinetti and his fellow avant-gardistes felt that they could attack the museum from without, or avoid institutionalisation in the first place, the neo-avant-garde undertook a more subversive critique of the institution from within. The neo-avant-garde’s movement inside the museum’s walls, as distinct from the avant-garde’s more naive and violent project of breaking them down from without, is thus a sophisticated double-play. Acting as a kind of Trojan horse, it acknowledges the power and permanence of autonomous art, and the museum’s role in underscoring this. This is not to say, however, that the neo-avant-garde is reconciled to or uncritical of autonomy; it may acknowledge autonomy but it does not take it for granted. It can be seen, then, that by simultaneously compounding and reversing the avant-garde project, the neo-avant-garde paradoxically affirmed the autonomy of art through their undermining of it. As Bürger writes, ‘[n]eo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life’.55 This is

54 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 57.
55 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 58.
particularly true, and particularly revealing, in that specific genre of the neo-avant-garde known as institutional critique.

Institutional critique can be defined as the attempt to 'integrate within the conception of a work, the final forms of distribution and the conditions of reception and acculturation, the modes of reading that ensue from them and that are contained within the practices of institutionalisation'. It takes the institution of art itself as its subject, examining the methods by which the structures for the display, dissemination, and sale of art – structures including art criticism, history, and education – construct meaning and value, whilst disguising their own complicity in these machinations of the culture industry. More than this, though, institutional critique is concerned to subvert the art museum's power to designate what is art and what is not, and mount a powerful challenge simultaneously to the institutionalising effects of the museum and to modernist definitions of art.

In its simplest form this project is merely an attempt, through various means, to make art that physically can not be collected by or installed in the museum. Artists working in this idiom sought to avoid the way in which art is constructed as such by the museum context, and escape its predetermination of art's value and meaning. The method also served to free art from what was perceived to be the museum's rarefied, fossilised atmosphere, and to reconnect it quite literally – and physically – with life in the world.

The broader genre thus includes site specific and land art, given that sculpture displayed outdoors, whether in the context of an urban or rural landscape, is an implicit critique of the way that art is framed both physically and ideologically by the museum. The earthworks and installations of artists such as Robert Smithson and Robert Morris, for instance, are too site specific to be 'museified'. Scale can also be used as a kind of weapon – works that are so large that they simply will not fit in any existing indoor space are safe from institutionalisation. But scale and site specificity are not the only means employed – ephemeral and performance art is often too transient to be collected, and thus is equally effective. There is also a trend, which continues into the present day in the

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work of artists like Damien Hirst, towards a certain formlessness or abjection which could be regarded as calling the museum's bluff – a testing of how 'low' art can go before the museum - or the museum's board of trustees, or the public - will revolt. Even such practices as assemblage art and the artist as curator, while they tend to be less specifically motivated by criticism, work around and against the museum's structures and display practices to create meaning.57 Describing this phenomenon, Julian Walker has written that

[...]he comparatively recent phenomenon of artists working in museums should come as no surprise; rather it is a surprise that it should be so recent. For visual artists working with objects, a museum is an environment in which we may examine how we feel about the things with which we construct our environment, our boundaries, our view of our history and ourselves; and given that curatorial discretion both determines and depends upon the language of object display, we may also examine how we are told to feel about both ourselves and others.58

So many of the more complex and calculated forms of institutional critique are underpinned by the idea that an object can acquire, change, or lose meaning according to its proximity and juxtaposition with other objects, and its conditions of display and presentation. In other words, this mode of institutional critique is concerned with the context and decontextualisation of art.

This advanced mode of institutional critique can be briefly introduced here, and its iconoclastic power demonstrated, through two classic examples. First is the work that Michael Asher ‘created’ for the Art Institute of Chicago’s 73rd American exhibition, which was a simple but effective act of recontextualisation. Removing the museum’s 18th Century bronze statue of George Washington, which had stood at the front of the museum for more than fifty years, he placed it inside the museum in a small gallery dedicated to European art of the same period. ‘Having been displaced from the front entrance of the museum, where it had served as a commemorative and decorative object, George Washington was put in the position of being seen in conjunction with other art. By being shown in the middle of the

57 On the artist as curator see Julian Stallabrass, 'Artist-Curators and the New British Art', Art and Design vol. 12, Jan / Feb 1997, pp. 79-81.

gallery at eye level, the sculpture of Washington was divested of its former purpose as a public monument. The museum context thus transformed the statue into a sculpture, another work of art embedded in history. Not incidentally, this work has important correspondences with the case of the Museum of Sydney and its installation the Edge of the Trees, as discussed at the beginning of the first chapter to this dissertation.

Another more politically engaged example would be Fred Wilson’s ‘Mining the Museum’ exhibition, installed in the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1992. This exhibition used a similar process of recontextualisation to examine how the museum excludes certain historical narratives, in this case Afro-American history. Wilson exposed the museum as an instrument that silences the ‘other’ by exclusion; in a glass case labelled ‘metalwork 1793-1880’, surrounded with elaborate silver pitchers and goblets, he inserted a set of slave manacles, and thus demonstrated the profound effect of context on the meaning of both the object and its institutional frame. By introducing a marginalised history back into a traditional, provincial museum, Wilson was able to invoke the multiplicity of stories excluded by a modernist historical metanarrative.

Other artists working in this genre each enact their own critique in their own ways. But the very fact that these diverse figures and practices can be gathered into a definable movement is a function of their reaction to the project of the historical avant-garde. In particular, as Hal Foster argues, they can be linked through their shared rediscovery of, fascination with, and re-analysis of the work of Marcel Duchamp. This included a critique of the ways in which Duchamp’s early avant-garde practice had itself been gradually institutionalised.60

60 Foster in fact refutes Bürger’s theory that the neo-avant-garde institutionalises autonomy, he writes that ‘to repeat the historical avant -garde, according to Bürger, is to cancel its critique of the institution of autonomous art; more, it is to invert this critique into an affirmation of autonomous art…the repetition of the avant-garde by the neo-avant-garde can only turn the anti-aesthetic into the artistic, the transgressive into the institutional.’ Hal Foster, ‘What’s Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?’ in The Duchamp Effect, ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, p. 13.
DUCHAMP’S ‘READYMADES’ AS ART AND/OR ARTEFACT

As Stefan Germer writes, ‘Duchamp took the separation of the cultural and social spheres as his point of departure, demonstrating that it was not the specific quality of an object but only the place and form of its presentation that decided its status’. With Fountain, the first and most revolutionary of his ‘readymades’, Duchamp thus began a discourse that continues to reverberate to this day. To be recognized as artworks, the readymades depended on the framing conditions of the art institution and the proximity of other, ‘legitimate’ art. They revealed the extent of the relationship of mutual legitimisation that exists between the institution of art, and the museum – the institution of art’s reception. The power of the museum, as ‘the social institution that transforms the primary language of art into the secondary language of culture’, was shown to be significantly constituted through its manipulation of context.

The transgressive appeal of the readymade lies in the reciprocal tension created between art and non-art. This tension was best played out in the realm of three-dimensional objects, ‘where sculpture was, and where everything material that was not art also was.’ The conservative reaction to Fountain was that it simply could not be art because it was a urinal – that is, the condition of being a urinal and the condition of being art were seen to be mutually exclusive. The power of the work thus lies in a relatively simple category confusion, the blurring of the boundaries between artwork and artefact. It is a problematisation of the object character of both art and artefact, as they are realised in the museum and in the world. In this, not incidentally, Duchamp’s critique bears similarities with an anthropological conception of art, as prefigured in the museum criticism of

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63 For Clement Greenberg, Duchamp’s Dada gesture was rationalised, not as the question of ‘What constitutes art’, but ‘What constitutes good art’ - ‘What is the ultimate source of value and quality in art?’. The readymades were art, in his view, but of a poor quality; Duchamp had abandoned all conventions of art except the most basic conditions which still allowed it’s definition as such: one being artist’s intention, the other the institutional frame. Clement Greenberg, After Abstract Expressionism, quoted in Michael Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, in Minimal Art, a Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968, p. 124.
Quatremère, and noted earlier. To re-frame an artefact as art is to upset the boundaries and discriminations entrenched in art museums at the deepest level. While a urinal might conceivably appear in a museum of human history or anthropology, perhaps as evidence of the history of plumbing or ideas of hygiene, its appearance in an art museum disrupts distinctions between types of museum, as well as categories of museum object, and what they might represent. But this also gave rise to a certain instability in the readymades themselves: as Thierry de Duve writes, they ‘did not always retain their three dimensional existence, for Duchamp’s power of designation was not always strong enough to keep them from slipping back and resuming their earlier life as common objects to be used and then discarded.’

This instability was further examined by Duchamp in his idea of the ‘reciprocal’ readymade, an object from the realm of art appropriated back into a functional role in everyday human life, as in Duchamp’s rallying cry: ‘Use a Rembrandt as an Ironing Board!’ The notion of art’s autonomy is manipulated and transgressed from both sides of the equation, with the aim ‘neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both.’ If a urinal can become art, and the museum can be coerced into accepting the transformation, then a Rembrandt can become an ironing board. Following this logic, the only obstacle to complete reciprocal exchange between the world of art and of domestic life is the commodity value and status of art, both of which are, not incidentally, constructed by the institution.

As a specific thread of the more general project of the neo-avant-garde, then, institutional critique would seem to bear out Bürger’s thesis. It is only because this practice is autonomous – that is, alienated from the world, with criticism itself as its principal function – that it can maintain the requisite distance both from life in the world and from the museum. In this context, the idea of the ‘museum piece’ takes on quite a new connotation: it is still, in a sense, an artwork designed to go straight into the museum, and not to attempt to take up a life in the world, or to


66 Hal Foster, ‘What’s Neo about the Neo-avant-garde’, p. 18.
reconcile art and life in the avant-garde manner. But rather than accepting the museum as an end in itself, the 'museum pieces' of the neo-avant-garde continue their work after their incarceration. Far from being defused or simply 'dying', these works act as irritants, coming to their critical fruition within the museum’s walls. In this way, artists working in the field of institutional critique expose the museum’s decontextualisation of art as being equally a recontextualisation, re-placing art within a network of narratives, ideologies, and structures of legitimation and control.

AUTONOMY AS DOUBLE-EDGED
The fact that Bürger identifies the project of the neo-avant-garde as compounding rather than undoing autonomy is instructive. This contradiction – a repudiation of autonomy that equally relies upon it – underscores the ambivalence inherent to the concept of autonomy itself. As Bürger finds, the notion of autonomous art is double-edged. It is only through its separation from the imperatives and contingencies of social, political and economic life that art is free to pursue its own ends, but this very freedom also holds the risk of irrelevance. More than this, art can never truly be free of the social conditions that gave rise to it, and the idea of autonomy serves to disguise this inherence in a problematical way. The ambivalent nature of art's autonomy, which oscillates between positive and negative poles, between freedom and alienation, is well captured by Bürger in the following passage:

In bourgeois society, art has a contradictory role: it projects the image of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But by realizing the image of a better order in fiction, which is semblance (Schein) only, it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change. They are assigned to confinement in an ideal sphere. … If the twofold character of art in bourgeois society consists in the fact that the distance from the social production and reproduction process contains an element of freedom and an element of the noncommittal and an absence of any consequences, it can be seen that the avant-gardistes’ attempt to reintegrate art into the life process is itself a profoundly contradictory endeavor. For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical recognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.67

67 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 50.
Identifying the ‘contradictory role’ of art in bourgeois society, in this passage Bürger notes that it acts as both a protest against existing conditions in the world, and the vision of another possibility, a ‘better order’. But the fact that this vision is realised in the realm of ‘fiction’ and ‘semblance’ also has the effect of releasing society from the obligation of making changes to the prevailing ‘bad order’. The impetus for positive change in the world is thus both displayed and dissipated in the ‘ideal realm’ of art, a realm that in its distance from society is essentially powerless. Bürger realises that the answer to this aporia is not to simply collapse the distance between art and life, and in this respect notes once again that the project of the historical avant-garde, to ‘reintegrate art into the life process’, is both contradictory and doomed. It is its very distance from social praxis, its alienation from life, that allows autonomous art to take a critical stance on life in the world, he argues. The collapsing of this distance would result in the loss of art’s critical function.

In this passage, then, an important aspect of Bürger’s thesis is articulated: he argues that the ‘profoundly contradictory endeavour’ of the historical avant-garde, to reconfigure art as immanent to rather than autonomous from life praxis, is self-defeating given that it would lead not only to the end of art’s distanced criticism of the world, but to the end of art as such. This insight becomes particularly telling for the present thesis when a parallel is noted: between the aims of the historical avant-garde, and the trajectory of much contemporary museum criticism. This is more than a curious coincidence. It is the mark of a common project – to collapse distance and to sublate alienation, to refuse autonomy, and to inhere both art and museum within the space, time, and experience of the everyday.

PART THREE: PARALLELS BETWEEN THE HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE AND THE NEW MUSEOLOGY

I would argue that the actions of contemporary museum theorists and critics who decry the museum’s alienation from the world, its mausoleum character and isolation behind supposedly impenetrable walls, consciously or unconsciously echo Marinetti’s exhortation to ‘seize pickax and hammer’ and tear those walls down. Marinetti’s crude iconoclasm may be virtually unrecognisable in the sophisticated contemporary discourse of museums, but it is buried there nevertheless. Neither is
this contemporary trend entirely metaphorical: attempts to make the institution ever more lively, interactive, and entertaining also have significant implications for the museum’s actual walls, for its architecture.

Bürger realises that the complete reconnection of art with life would also result in the end of art as such. There are significant correspondences here with Michael Fried’s complaint about the dissipatory effects of minimal and post-minimal art, and I discussed this in the previous chapter. Following the same general trajectory as both Bürger and Fried, it is possible to argue that the complete reconciliation of the museum with life would also mean the end of the museum. Bürger argues that when art is entirely dissolved within the everyday, it is no longer even identifiable, let alone socially significant. He argues both that the project of the avant-garde was always contradictory, given that attacks against art’s autonomy were themselves made possible by that autonomy, and that the project eventually failed, as evidenced by the rise of the neo-avant-garde. More than this, the avant-garde project of ‘sublating’ art into life must, in his terms, inevitably lead to the dissolution of art as a distinct category altogether. In all of the critical discourse that calls for the breaking down of the museum’s mausoleum character and its reconnection with life in the world, the possibility is rarely recognised: this too would dissolve and disperse the museum until its very distinctness, along with its value to society, was lost.

According to this logic, it would only be through an indirect engagement that the museum, like autonomous art, could maintain a meaningful connection with empirical reality. A museum entirely dissolved within the everyday could have neither a critical nor indeed a particularly interesting stance in relation to life praxis. So just as Bürger argued that the dissolution of autonomous art into life praxis is a ‘profoundly contradictory endeavour’, one which would dissolve the critical utility of art along with its autonomy, it is possible to see the mode of museum criticism that seeks to ‘ruin’ the institution, break down its walls and reinherit it with life praxis, as also ‘profoundly contradictory’.

While the historical avant-garde had little actual success in dissolving the way art is reframed by the art museum, the new museology has had quite a measure of ‘success’ by its own standards, in breaking down the barriers between the museum and the world, as emblematised in liveliness, and facilitated by (in
Fried’s terms) ‘theatrical’ architecture. In some museums of natural history, science, and particularly of social history, the boundaries between everyday, empirical life in the present and the space and objects of the museum are now virtually invisible. Art museums of course are another story, as I have already noted. But this in itself is instructive – the ideology that art museums project, of being themselves somehow autonomous, has significant implications for art museum architecture – as supposedly more ‘artlike’ than other museum architecture – but also for the role that art might potentially take within the wider museum matrix.

CONCLUSIONS

At this crucial juncture in its history, then, the museum is faced with more questions than answers. It could be argued, on the one hand, that it is precisely the gap between the museum and life in the present that the postmodern critique of institutions has sought to bridge. And there have been good reasons for this: the chasm between museum and life was constituted partly by a hegemony over ‘high’ culture that was both covertly ideological, and overtly exclusionary. But for these very same reasons, any advocacy of a return to, a revaluation, or even simply a reconsideration of the possible critical value of the discontinuity between museum and world – as I am proposing here – would be vehemently opposed in some quarters. The proposal that the museum’s mausoleum character, as the mark of its autonomy from life in the world, has a value and should be preserved would no doubt be regarded by many – if not most – museum theorists as conservative, reactionary, and retrograde. But is the general movement away from deathliness and towards immanence within life really in keeping with the nature of the museum? And more particularly, is this the way in which museums can best enact a role and purpose within society, a purpose that has the potential to be one of critical commentary and analysis rather than simple reflection?

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68 This returns us to the idea of the museum as a ‘way of seeing’, and it is possible that art museums could make a space for ‘autonomy’ if we can take that (in a weaker sense than what I have been using it here) to be a space for pure aesthetic pleasure. This would be a conception where the art museum reifies autonomy, makes it a thing or state experienced in itself as it were independently of any one artwork. But this would also be an autonomy sheared of its critical function. It could be described as the fetishisation of autonomy.
The current doctrine of ‘history from the ground’ up means that ordinary people can indeed now go to the museum and see themselves reflected there, and much museum marketing and rhetoric assumes that this identification of the self, rather than the other, is a great popular drawcard. The museum no longer aspires so explicitly to the edification of the populace, and concentrates much less intensely on the arrangement of the ‘highest’ products of culture. The drive towards ‘liveliness’ in the museum has become enmeshed with ideas of democracy, fairness, and accessibility in a way that makes it hard to refute.

Of course, museum accessibility and democracy and all those attendant ideas are clearly important, and the effect that the postmodern critique of institutions has had is positive in many ways. The identification and analysis of the museum’s exclusivities and complicities, its unspoken assumptions and prejudices hidden under the presumption of authenticity, objectivity, and truth, has been a valuable project indeed. But the point is that following this critical project, this necessary ruination, the institution should neither be written off altogether, nor modified beyond recognition. The present moment of critical re-evaluation, when the museum stands stripped bare, provides a unique opportunity to retrieve important aspects of the ‘old’ museum, revise and reframe them, and reinvent the museum as a self-critical, reflexive institution. This is nowhere more evident than in the crisis of the museum object itself.

The principal conclusion of the second chapter was that the museum can only be said to have a history that is in any way continuous if that history is one of objects and collections. The different ordering systems to which museum objects and collections have been subject across time, the different ideas that they have been called upon to prove or represent, are diverse, historically specific and sometimes contradictory. The history of museums, if it is to be possible at all, must thus be one of thought acting upon objects. And while the project of identifying a coherent history for the museum is not in itself the purpose or even the hope of this dissertation, the finding does indicate that it is objects themselves, as the proper contents of museums, which serve to link the institution to ancient and fundamental human concerns.

The ability of objects to hold and convey meaning, and be a site for narratives and allegories of the place of humankind within the universe, thus means
that their role in museums, albeit threatened, should not be too hastily abandoned. This is not to say that the museum’s modes of choosing, selecting, acquiring, curating, displaying, and interpreting objects are not without problems, in the present as in the past. Indeed, if anything, these issues continue to multiply in number and complexity. But if it is objects themselves that lie at the heart of the museum’s deathliness, its mortification of culture, then the loss of such objects finds its corollary in a current more general rhetorical and museological shift towards liveliness. This shift, which has occurred across the threshold of postmodernism, not only represents a change in the museum’s emphasis – notably a shift towards entertainment and populism – but also away from object-based representation. It also, more fundamentally, represents a shift I have already noted several times - away from museum objects and towards human subjects, and phenomenal experience, as the true concern of museums. So the very regularity with which the museum has been condemned as dead, deadly, and deathly in the modern period is highly instructive – it is the mark of something as significant as it is repressed.

In this chapter the idea of art as autonomous has provided a complex instance in which it may be held to have been good to have decontextualised the object, and to explain the ways in which modern art is always already decontextualised from its moment of conception. In closing, then, a proposition: could it be that the museum’s decontextualisation of objects, whether artworks or artefacts, is in fact a liberation, which opens those objects to new meanings and possibilities? Could it be, indeed, that it is only through ‘killing’ objects, mortifying and tearing them from their context in the world, that they can, as shades, in the museum have the life that the instrumentalised world denies them? And even more crucially, might this process have a critical function, the effect of stripping objects bare of the accretions of affirmative culture, and revealing the blindness of simple assent to the culture that we have? These are the propositions I wish to make here. But in order to prove them, and the ways in which this might bear upon architecture, it is necessary to turn to the next chapter, and a closer examination of Adorno’s conception of the special social utility of autonomous art.
CHAPTER FIVE

Alienation and Negativity: The Critical Function of Autonomous Art

Adorno’s account of artistic autonomy is highly complex. On the one hand, the independence of the arts from religious, political, and other social structures, as institutionalised and theorized in Western societies, creates a space where societal wounds can be exposed and alternative arrangements imagined. On the other hand, because such independence itself depends on the division of labour, class conflict, and dominance in society of the capitalist “exchange principle,” the space of exposure and imagination serves to shore up the societal system even as that space becomes internally problematic and externally irrelevant. As Adorno puts it at the beginning of Aesthetic Theory, referring to the modern art movements, absolute freedom in art stands in a contradiction with the abiding unfreedom of society as a whole. Yet it is only because of autonomy that certain works of art can achieve a critical and utopian “truth content” (Wahrheitsgehalt), in whose absence a fundamental transformation of society would be even more difficult to envision.1

Lambert Zuidervaart

The truth content of artworks is fused with their critical content.2

Theodor Adorno

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INTRODUCTION: NEGATIVE MUSEUM DIALECTICS

One of the key arguments of the previous chapter was that the concept of autonomy provides a case – albeit a contested and ambivalent one – where it might be held to have been good to have decontextualised the museum object. The object taken from the world and placed in the museum, decontextualised and ‘killed’, can also be conceived as being transformed or even redeemed: its crossing over the museum’s threshold argued to be both a mortification and a revelation of meaning. Demythified, stripped of its affirmative character, the museum object would thus become a critical object, re-viewed allegorically through the museum’s specific frame of reference.

The emancipatory potential of this logic has been recognised before, particularly in the practice of montage: the fragment that is so characteristic of the modern is also the thing that opens and undoes the fixed unity of a given whole. It is only when objects are wrested from their context, and in the process divested of hardened and fossilised meanings and all the accretions of capitalist exchange, that they can be recollected and reopened to meaning and interpretation. As Adorno writes, ‘the fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality’,\(^3\) and this conception of the fragment as the critical, even interrogative part of the work can be seen as a pointer towards his broader understanding of art’s resolutely negative relation to the world.

But while the redemptive possibilities of the museum object as fragment have been recognised before by museum critics, along with the potential for new meaning located in the broken, fragmented, and mortified, this has very rarely been extended to the museum on an institutional level. The deathliness that I have argued to be inherent to museums has most often been conceived as a negative, stultifying influence, and its influence gathered under the dismissive label of ‘mausoleum’. I have noted that it is not coincidental that this label implies a vault-like and monumental architecture. The historical isolation and separation of the museum from life in the world is not at issue here; that is widely agreed. What is at stake is the reconception of the possible benefit of this deathliness, especially as it might be manifest in museum architecture.

\(^3\) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 45.
As the thesis has already noted, the majority of museum theorists who subscribe to the idea of the museum as mausoleum have failed to consider the possibility that the very negativity, the very deathliness of the museum could itself be a sign of its hope for a reconciled future, its sceptical optimism, and its basic good intentions towards the world. In order to come to such an understanding, it is necessary to pursue a radical negative dialectic – employing both a term and the method derived from Adorno. His conception of the social utility of autonomous art turns an affirmative understanding of art’s role inside out – he finds art’s distinct use value in its very uselessness, and locates its critical capacity and social utility precisely in its negativity and isolation. More than this, Adorno finds that it is the artwork’s actual groundedness in the empirical world, its quality of being also an object or artefact, which provides it with the motivation to enact a critical function in society.

Adorno’s nuanced account of the social utility of autonomous art can be seen to have far-reaching implications for art, artefacts, and more significantly also for the museum in the postmodern age. His proposition of a negative dialectic between art and life demonstrates that even though the inherent alienation of art might have a distinct value, this is not ‘positive’ in the sense of being uncritically affirmative or comforting. It is precisely the negative stance that autonomous art takes in relation to empirical reality that marks both its expression of suffering and its hope for utopia; it is through negation rather than affirmation that art shows its despairing and unsettling love for the world. As Hilde Heynen has eloquently stated this,

To [Adorno] the objective of modern art is to make people aware of the terrifying character of everyday reality. Under these circumstances, negativity is the only way to keep the idea of the utopian alive. Indeed, the utopian is inconceivable in a positive form, for no image is powerful enough to illustrate the utopian in a positive way without making it appear ridiculous and banal.4

This chapter will open, and then test, the possibility of the museum itself having a similarly critical but affirmative relation with utopia and empirical reality.

The chapter is structured into three parts. The first is an exposition and exegesis of Adorno’s conception of autonomous art, its nature, role, and relation to the world. While this summary is lengthy, and draws upon a number of secondary sources, it reveals the complexities of Adorno’s theory, which can then be brought to bear on my own argument about museums and museum architecture. It begins in relation to the previous chapter’s discussion of the work of Peter Bürger, and an analysis of how Bürger and Adorno’s understandings of autonomous art are distinct. It then moves on to Adorno’s understanding of the way art’s critical function is underpinned by its artefactuality or object character, and closes with the obligation that this groundedness charges art with – to reveal the suffering and injustice of the world. This leads into the second part of the chapter, which proposes a direct (though equally layered) parallel between Adorno’s negative dialectical relation of autonomous art to the world, and an analogous relation of the deathly or alienated or autonomous museum to the world. The third part of the chapter attempts to locate the condition of the museum institution, at the level both of objects and of architecture, where this parallel might be borne out or even move towards convergence. It therefore sets the terms of reference for the following two chapters, where the architecture and museological strategies of the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, are examined within this theoretical framework.

PART ONE: ALIENATION AND ARTEFACTUALITY, CRITICISM AND AUTONOMY IN ADORNO’S AESTHETIC THEORY

In the previous chapter, the work of Bürger was used to examine the means and motivations behind the historical avant-garde’s perpetual struggle against the museum. It was found that this is equally a struggle against conceptions of art as necessarily and properly separate from the historical, social, and economic conditions from which it arose. As noted, Bürger derived an important aspect of his theory of the avant-garde from Adorno, particularly the concept of autonomy as a double-edged, yet inescapable, element of modern art. One of the principal ways in which Bürger departed from Adorno’s position was in the development and division of Adorno’s blanket assertions about ‘modern art’ into a specific, historically defined theory of the avant-garde. There was, however, another aspect of Adorno’s
concept of autonomous art that Bürger did not pursue so strongly, namely Adorno’s claim for the special social utility of autonomous art as *autonomous*. In the interest of working backwards through Bürger to Adorno, then, it is worth mapping out the major points of commonality and difference between their respective theories. These have been well summarised by Lambert Zuidervaart, and in seeking the nuances of Adorno’s position, it is worth quoting him here at some length. Zuidervaart writes that:

Despite their differences, Bürger and Adorno have a shared position about the autonomy of art. This position involves six claims. (1) Art has become independent from other institutions in bourgeois society. (2) Art’s independence, and claims concerning its independence, depend on developments in other institutions, especially political and economic ones; the autonomy of art has always been relative to bourgeois society as a whole. (3) The relative independence of art has become increasingly tied to the production and reception of art works whose primary functions have not been the accomplishment of purposes directly served by other institutions, whether economic, political, religious, or academic. The primary functions of these works have been somewhat peculiar to art – maintaining an image of humanity, expressing “irrational” needs and desires, satisfying aesthetic contemplation, or undermining the autonomy of art. (4) Autonomous art both affirms and criticizes the society to which it belongs. This combination of affirmation and criticism is inextricable from its autonomy. (5) Because of external pressures and developments within art itself, the autonomy of art has become increasingly problematic in advanced capitalist societies. (6) Nevertheless, autonomy remains crucial for art’s contributions within advanced capitalist society. Autonomous art, by virtue of its autonomy, has a special social significance. Although Bürger is less enthusiastic about this last claim, he too suggests that autonomy may be legitimate and necessary so long as advanced capitalist societies have not been fundamentally transformed.\(^5\)

Taking Zuidervaart’s deft enumeration at its word, there are three particular points of interest here. The thesis has already touched upon the first and second ‘claims’, which are concerned with the ways in which art has become ‘independent’, separated from bourgeois society, but that as a result of having grown from specific historical and social conditions it remains tied to and defined by this same bourgeois society. Zuidervaart’s fifth point has not been stated explicitly here, but it is implicit in the very formulation of this dissertation. It is quite clear that ‘the autonomy of art has become increasingly problematic in advanced capitalist

societies’, for a whole range of reasons. That an entire discourse has grown up around this issue renders its problematic nature self-evident. So leaving these three aside, it is more apposite here to pursue the implications of the third, fourth, and sixth claims.

According to Zuidervaart, then, Bührer may have less investment in the idea of the ‘special social significance’ of autonomous art than Adorno, but both agree that its critical capacity provides a necessary, if negatory, corrective to ‘untransformed’ capitalist society. The relationship of autonomous art to society is thus central to what might be called its purposiveness. But this relationship is complex indeed, and the critical/affirmative nexus between autonomous art and the society to which it belongs is conditioned not only by distance, and by a yearning towards a possible ‘reconciled’ future, but also by the ‘uselessness’ of art as such. In his third contention, Zuidervaart surmises that for Bürger and Adorno the ‘relative independence’ of art as a whole is reliant on artworks that do not set out to fulfil a specific purpose. Another way of putting this might be that such art is not interested in the workings of the everyday, or that it does not participate in a means-end relationship, or even that it is ‘excess’ to the drolleries of the world. The fact that the functions of these ‘useless’ works are, in Zuidervaart’s cautious terms, ‘somewhat peculiar to art’, is also akin to the high modernist ideal of formalism, of an art which pursues only its internal imperatives, and thus spirals ever inward into its own formal, media specificity.

In this same third contention, Zuidervaart also notes that one of the ‘functions’ of such art is ‘undermining the autonomy of art’ itself. This can be read as a restatement of Bürger’s idea of the contradictoriness of the avant-garde project as examined in the previous chapter: attempts to undermine the autonomy of art are themselves located within the frame of autonomy. This kind of mirror effect is exactly what is identified and worked into a critical art practice by the neo-avant-garde, and by institutional critique in particular, as I have noted. But the crucial thing to take from this third contention is the idea that autonomous art is not without a function, but that its functions are distinctly irrational and unproductive. These include, as Zuidervaart writes, ‘maintaining an image of humanity, expressing “irrational” needs and desires, satisfying aesthetic contemplation, or undermining the autonomy of art’. The point here is that in a world that views
everything in rational, product-oriented terms, these functions may have come to seem useless, but this reveals more about the world than about the art. Indeed, art would be one of the few remaining bastions that can stand against the ever-increasing instrumentalisation of the world.

Heynen writes that, for Adorno, it is the very uselessness of art that allows it to take such a role; ‘the existence of art as a domain not totally permeated by rationality provides in itself a critique of the domination of rationality. Adorno argues that the uselessness of art, its refusal to be “for-something-else”, unmistakably implies a form of criticism with regard to a society where everything is forced to be useful.’ The functions of autonomous art are both varied and valuable, and a world that fails to see these as important, or even as functions at all, is immediately marked out as itself instrumentalised and over-determined. Autonomous art stands as a corrective and resistance to the pervasiveness of such rationalization, and thus art’s unproductiveness and its autonomy are two sides of the same coin. Autonomous art may fulfil functions that are specific to itself, but in that very self-containment lies its usefulness to the world that it both arises from and turns back towards.

Zuidervaart’s fourth claim for the commonality between Adorno and Bürger’s theories of autonomous art is that ‘[a]utonomous art both affirms and criticizes the society to which it belongs’, and therefore that ‘this combination of affirmation and criticism is inextricable from its autonomy.’ This dialectical inherence of criticism within affirmation, the negative within the positive, is characteristic of Adorno’s thought. It particularly marks his determination to both criticise and give expression to the suffering, unreconciled world, and only through that to affirm the hope of a better possibility. It would be no more conceivable to isolate positive from negative critique than it would be to isolate autonomous art from the society that gave rise to it, or the ‘material’ through which art takes form from the idea that motivates it. Furthermore, these dialectics are all intertwined.

Finally, the sixth claim that Zuidervaart makes is that ‘autonomy remains crucial for art’s contributions within advanced capitalist society. Autonomous art, by

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6 Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, p. 185.
virtue of its autonomy, has a special social significance.' This is in many ways the culmination of Zuidervaart’s analysis. And even in spite of the moderation at the end, that ‘[a]lthough Bürger is less enthusiastic about this last claim, he too suggests that autonomy may be legitimate and necessary so long as advanced capitalist societies have not been fundamentally transformed’, Zuidervaart here has articulated the central claim that Adorno’s theory of autonomous art makes for social significance: that it is precisely through its autonomy that such art is able to make a meaningful ‘contribution’ to advanced capitalist society at all. It is through distance that it finds proximity, through dislocation that it finds engagement. The negative dialectic persists even through a logic that is apparently contradictory. Balancing its positive and negative moments is the necessary task of autonomous art, and this antinomy comes to presentation within the artwork itself as dissonance, where the ‘immanent play of forces in the artwork converges with external reality.’

ART AS THE HOPEFUL REMODELLING OF THE EMPIRICAL WORLD

In Adorno’s conception, then, the distinct social utility of autonomous art is constituted precisely through its alienation from the world. An art autonomous of the exigencies of social and political life, he argued, could act as both hopeful promise of utopia and dogged criticism of existing conditions. The social utility of such art would not be a function of its content, that is to say its specific message, but rather of its form, and of the way it functions in society. As James Harding states it,

For Adorno, the autonomy of art is double-edged, and although he appears to hold to a philosophy of l’art pour l’art, Adorno has a radical theoretical adherence to the relation between art and society. On the one hand, he affirms that socio-historical change makes the separation of art and practical life unavoidable. But on the other, the separation does not denote the irrelevance of art to life. The relevance, however, can only be stated in negative terms. Adorno uses the autonomy of art to sustain art’s negative

7 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 15.
value, i.e., to sustain the integrity of the unresolved negative tensions (the non-identity) a work has with a specific historic moment.⁸

In Adorno’s terms, art that is not autonomous is art at the service of the culture industry, or of the aestheticisation of politics. The excesses of fascist art and architecture are proof enough that art in the direct service of politics is propaganda, but conversely, separating art completely from politics negates its possible role in criticising the political order, and also in expressing the anguish of the repressed. In Adorno’s conception, art must be politically engaged, but avoid subordination to the ends of politics. The only way that this is possible is by its retaining a certain attached detachment from the political world. In doing so, it maintains its freedom from domination, but only at the cost of sacrificing its ability to act directly upon society. Autonomy thereby necessarily entails both freedom and powerlessness. But despite this ambivalent attitude towards the world which gave rise to it, the fact remains that autonomous art does arise from social conditions, and is linked inextricably to them, pointing its critique back across the gap to the place and circumstances from whence it came. In Adorno’s terms art is ‘the social antithesis of society’, and while it is not ‘directly deducible’ from that society, it is inextricably linked nevertheless, and a crucial element of this link lies in its material.⁹

At one level there is a certain basic commonality between the ‘highest’ artwork and the ‘lowest’ or most quotidian artefact, since autonomous art is made from the same substance as objects in everyday life. This object character – or ‘artefactuality’ in Zuidervaart’s terms, namely art’s ‘socio-historical dialectic between artistic materials and material artistry’ – thus takes on a crucial significance.¹⁰ For Adorno, artefactuality is not only inherent and inescapable but is also the crucial, literal overlap between autonomous artworks and empirical reality. As he writes, ‘it is precisely as artifacts, as products of social labour, that [artworks] also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which

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⁹ Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 8.
they draw their content [Inhalt]. Art negates the categorical determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance.¹¹ This position explicitly acknowledges that an artwork is also a material thing, also an artefact in the neutral sense of being an object of culture. To say that an artwork is a ‘thing’, however, is not to assert that it is a ‘thing among other things’, as Adorno writes:

The need for objective art was not fulfilled in functional means and therefore encroached on autonomous means. It disavows art as the product of human labour, one that nevertheless does not want to be an object, a thing among other things. Art that is simply a thing is an oxymoron. Yet the development of this oxymoron is nevertheless the inner direction of contemporary art.¹²

Much of Adorno’s aesthetic theory can be seen as a rearguard action against this ‘inner direction’, which is indeed a significant trend in contemporary art to this day. I have already noted that much of this practice can be traced back, either directly or indirectly, to Marcel Duchamp’s ‘readymades’, as discussed at length in chapter four. Duchamp’s deliberate category confusion between artwork and artefact is exactly the knowing manipulation of art defined as ‘a thing among other things’ – or more specifically art as a thing that used to be a thing – that Adorno decries. Likewise, Fried also distrusts minimal art because it is art theatrically masquerading as a thing among other things. I will return to these ideas, but the point here is that Adorno’s position does not abandon the object character of art, but notes its importance in the actual constitution of autonomy.

Adorno’s reference here to ‘objective art’ affirms both meanings of the word. He allows for an art that is an object – having a material reality – and which is also objective, in the sense of viewing the world from a distanced, disinterested, and critical position. More than this, art’s object character is what fundamentally links it to empirical reality, and therefore secures its commitment to society; its very object character provides the reason why art would be motivated to look back upon the world at all. This simultaneous distance and proximity, alienation and

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¹¹ Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 5.
¹² Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 58.
immanence of the empirical world within the artwork can thus be seen as crucial to how and why it enacts its critical function.

As Adorno writes, ‘Criticism fulfils the muted intentions of the work of art by giving voice to [its] truth content and thereby elaborating the work’s inherent connections with the extra-aesthetic world.’\textsuperscript{13} Now the very fact that he countenances the existence of an ‘extra-aesthetic’ world is significant, given that a sizeable proportion of art practice today is based on the conviction that there is no extra-aesthetic realm, that there are (or should be) no barriers between art and life. The thesis has already examined such ideas in depth in relation to the work of both Fried and Bürger, and also in the observation of a parallel between the project of the historical avant-garde and that of the new museology.\textsuperscript{14} Without wishing to over-schematise these complex and separate theoretical positions, their convergence around this point – a mutual identification and mistrust of the ‘oxymoron’ of art as ‘simply a thing’ – should be noted. The common thread between Adorno, Fried and Bürger on this matter is a concern with boundaries – between genres of art, between artworks and artefacts, between art and life, and by extension between the museum and the world. Each of them are concerned with the maintenance of a realm outside of empirical reality, which can act as both a criticism and a corrective to that reality. The collapse of the boundaries between art and life would mean the neutralisation of the critical function of autonomous art, equally as it would signal the increasing aestheticisation of all other aspects of the empirical world. This was a process of which Walter Benjamin, too, was justifiably wary, and which he explicitly identified in Marinetti’s glorification and aestheticisation of war. But leaving these ideas aside for the moment, (including


\textsuperscript{14} Fried’s thesis was discussed in chapter three. His identification of Minimalism’s intermediality, and the art work’s acknowledgement of an audience and situation, was found to be symptomatic of a more general trend in contemporary art to this day. This movement was also found to be moving outside the bounds of art and spreading to museums, and modes of museum display, more generally. It was argued that a museological shift towards theatricality – which includes the deliberate blurring of boundaries between ‘art’ and ‘history’ as conventionally defined – coincided with another shift in contemporary museums, towards liveliness and the gradual diminution of the ‘deathly’ gap between the museum and the world. This, in turn, was argued (in chapter four) to relate to the defining characteristic of the historical avant-garde, as argued by Peter Bürger: the struggle to overcome the historical separation between art and life, as enshrined in the notion of art’s autonomy.
the possibility that this general move towards aestheticisation has equally engulfed museum processes and practices), the notion also has implications for exactly how and where autonomous art, in Adorno’s conception, is distinguishable from other ‘things’.

If, according to Adorno, the crucial connection between artworks and artefacts lies in the material, the crucial distinction between them lies in form – or more specifically in form as ‘sedimented content’. The significance of form in Adorno’s aesthetic theory has been perceptively noted by Robert Wolin, who writes that

For Adorno, the utopian content of art is conveyed indirectly through the moment of form, and never explicitly in terms of content or a ‘message’. All art, even the most purely mimetic, stands in opposition to empirical reality as such, for the idea of the reorganization of reality is inherent to the concept of form itself. By absorbing the elements of empirical reality into the framework of the autonomous dimension of form, by giving these elements new life, art seeks to remedy the deficiencies of reality as simple being-there. All important art is socially critical: by virtue of its utopian moment, it serves as an enchanted mirror held up to a refractory reality that confronts the latter with the hiatus between its promises and its truth. By recrystallizing the diffuse elements of reality into a coherent whole, art strips the veil of its contingency from them in order that they might be apprehended in a more rarified light. The totalizing, synthetic and constructive character art assumes in the face of the fallen nature of the empirical world lends it an affinity with the concept of redemption, for by providing a refuge for those aspects of reality which are commonly denied a home, by exposing those elements to the regenerative powers of aesthetic form, art symbolizes the condition of salvation to which they will accede in a better world.15

In Wolin’s reading of Adorno, the autonomous artwork represents the reorganisation of reality, rather than its abandonment or its converse. And this can also stand as a functional definition of ‘form’ itself – as the re-ordering and re-arrangement of the quotidian matter of the world, not for instrumental or productive purposes, but for the ‘autonomous’ purposes of art. Indeed, the way in which art acts to liberate elements of empirical reality from overdetermination, from the very need to be ‘productive’, is a critique in itself, and I will return to this crucial point shortly. But on a more general level, the critical function of autonomous art is constituted in the fact that it attempts to form and rearrange the matter of the world

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into a *better* order. Its form will thus always, inherently, enact a critique of the ‘unreconstructed’ world, which it both reflects and criticises in this reflection. In Wolin’s eloquent terms, autonomous art’s utopian moment occurs precisely in its ‘re-crystallizing the diffuse elements of reality into a coherent whole’. In this way, art ‘strips the veil of its contingency from them in order that they might be apprehended in a more rarified light.’ And here again is a connection with one of the principal threads pursued throughout this thesis. It is – in Wolin’s terms – ‘fallen nature’ that autonomous art takes as its material; it is the irrational and the repressed, those aspects of the world that have already failed, been set aside, or corrupted, that art takes up. To put this another way, art is concerned with collecting that which has already died, and regenerating, reforming, and thus re-vivifying it, ‘providing a refuge for those aspects of reality which are commonly denied a home’.

Adorno’s account of autonomous art is thus particularly interesting because he argues that the realm of art and the realm of empirical reality find both their negative and positive apotheosis within the other: ‘[b]y virtue of its rejection of the empirical world – a rejection that inheres in art’s concept and thus is no mere escape, but a law immanent to it – art sanctions the primacy of reality’.16 If these two spheres are complete and separate in themselves – indeed if each serves to constitute the other as autonomous – this does not mean that they are mutually exclusive, and indeed in Adorno’s conception they are mutually *inclusive*.17 He writes that:

Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work’s own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence. Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience. Although the demarcation line between art and the empirical must not be effaced, and least of all by the glorification of the artist, artworks nevertheless have a life *sui generis*.16

17 Adorno writes that ‘Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this world too were an autonomous entity.’ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.
The relation of art to the empirical reality from which it sprang is thus simultaneously one of consolation and criticism. Autonomous art can be comforting, but never by smoothing over the domination that is in the world – rather by demonstrating that there could be an other, better and kinder order. And it is precisely through this renunciation of the empirical world that the autonomous artwork displays its regard for it, a regard simultaneously hopeful and despairing. It's self-sacrifice points towards the possibility of a distant future reconciliation, whilst still doggedly exposing the unreconciled reality of the present moment. Art can only formulate this vision if it is autonomous in the sense of being alienated from but still fundamentally of the world. As Heynen states this, 'In order not to fall back into useless consolation, in order to serve as genuine critique, art is obliged to enter into a relation of similarity with reality, against which it levels its criticism.'

**DISSONANCE, UGLINESS, AND THE EXPRESSION OF SUFFERING**

In Adorno’s terms, the purpose of the autonomous artwork is to stand for all the suffering of the world, its ‘accumulated, speechless pain’. Indeed, it is the responsibility of art to acknowledge this suffering, and any art that passes over it in silence is an ‘injustice to the dead’. There is an element of renunciation in this, of sacrifice. So long as the world is unreconciled and conditioned by suffering, art must not only express, but embody this state: ‘[f]or the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced. It is thus that desire survives in art.’ Wolin has identified this ‘sinister’ aspect of autonomous art,

[B]y virtue of its ‘sinister’ qualities, dissonant art is the only art that retains the courage to call society by its actual name. It steadfastly refuses to pass over the anguish of existence in silence ... By simultaneously distancing itself from the conventions of society in an increasingly radical manner, by treating society as its adversary, its other, dissonant art stands as the living indictment of society. One of the essential traits of modernism is its radical autonomy, its firm refusal to participate in the utilitarian mill of social life. By virtue of this autonomy, modernism both saves itself from incorporation into the reifying network of commodity production and also polemicsizes against

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this sphere as being inimical to spirit. By shattering the omnipresent semblance of well-being, a chief weapon in late capitalism’s ideological arsenal of legitimation techniques, dissonant art lays bare the substratum of suffering and strife that lie beneath society’s pretension to being Reason incarnate.\textsuperscript{23}

The crucial role that such dissonant art plays in giving expression to suffering, in Adorno’s terms, also dictates that it not be ‘enjoyable’ in any simple or conventional sense. Far from ‘harmoniously quieting antagonisms, a dream image of a better life,’ art is deeply engaged with ‘the misery from which this image is wrested’.\textsuperscript{24} For this reason art requires effort, and when truly beheld it entails the gruelling task of staring barbarity and domination in the face. Autonomous art, with all of its unsettling, ugly truths, stands as an objective refutation to affirmative culture. And in this conception, while the late capitalist culture industry is busily papering over the cracks and presenting a semblance of harmony, autonomous art is one of very few critical voices that remain, and remain effective. Once again, this is not a function of a particular ‘critical’ content; Adorno is scathing in his condemnation of the blatant message of ‘social realist’ art, equally as he decries the fascist appropriation of art for explicitly political ends. The critical function of autonomous art is more a question of form. And this brings me to a crucial connection: just as autonomous art enacts a simultaneously critical and affirmative relationship to reality, and the concept of autonomy provides an instance where it might be held to have been good to have decontextualised the museum object, autonomy might also provide a conceptual framework through which the apparent deathliness or alienation of the museum itself might be seen to have some critical value. In other words, the quality which contemporary museological criticism has insisted on seeing as the museum’s mausoleum character might be recast as something akin to autonomy.

\textbf{PART TWO: THE AUTONOMOUS MUSEUM, OR, THE NECESSARY ALIENATION OF THE INSTITUTION}

If Adorno is correct in his determinedly negative conception of authentic art, as being \textit{obliged} to acknowledge and express past and present suffering in the world,


\textsuperscript{24} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, p. 12.
then this can also be proposed to be the role of museums in the postmodern age. The point here is that art or museum which is merely entertaining or pleasant is a double debasement, both failing to acknowledge the unreconciled state of the world, and actively covering it up at the behest of the culture industry. And this is potentially a particular danger for the museum – it may remain an important instrument for entertainment and education, but this is problematic if such instrumentalisation entirely displaces the institution’s other, marginalised and yet historical role in the deathly recognition and critique of barbarism.

What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its negativity is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn. In its pleasure in the repressed, art at the same time takes into itself the disaster, the principle of repression, rather than merely protesting hopelessly against it. That art enunciates the disaster by identifying with it anticipates its enervation; this, not any photograph of the disaster or false happiness, defines the attitude of authentic contemporary art to a radically darkened objectivity; the sweetness of any other gives itself the lie.  

In this key passage is articulated exactly the possible negative relation between the museum and empirical reality that I am proposing here. If the words ‘the museum’ are substituted for ‘modern art’ in the passage, it becomes very revealing indeed. The majority of contemporary thought correctly identifies the ‘negativity’ of the museum, but gathers it under the sign of the mausoleum. This deathly character can be seen as ‘the epitome of what established culture has repressed’, as exactly the mortification of culture, the gathering of the ruins and discarded detritus of history, that this thesis has argued to be essential to the character of museums. If this is accepted, then the role of the museum could be radically reconfigured – not to provide ‘sweetness’, but to express the ‘radically darkened objectivity’ that the world has inherited from the murderous darkened objectivity of the twentieth century. To pretend otherwise, still appropriating Adorno’s terms, would be to ‘give the lie’ to the actual reality of unreconciled domination, and to corroborate the repression of this ‘disaster’. Likewise, if the museum was to become entirely useful, rationalised, and instrumental, this would be the final mark of its having succumbed to the perpetuation and dissemination of affirmative culture.

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This bears out the thesis explored in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Heynen identifies in this text the idea of an inherent ambiguity in the Enlightenment project, between ‘critical rationality’ and ‘instrumental rationality’. She writes that ‘[t]he dialectic of Enlightenment consists precisely in the fact that through the process of rationalization, critical rationality – the rationality that was at the origins of the project of Enlightenment as a project of emancipation – is being reduced to instrumental rationality’.26 In particular, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s chapter on the culture industry, which famously characterises Enlightenment as ‘Mass Deception’, Heynen notes that ‘[t]o respond without thinking and to be entertained without having to make an effort – these are the logical consequences of a social development of which every aspect is completely governed by the laws of rationalization’.27 These consequences might also be played out in exactly the uncomplicated fun, education and entertainment of the new, ‘lively’ mode of museum, which I have noted throughout the thesis.

In this sense, then, the museum is in danger of being overtaken by precisely the ‘instrumental rationality’ that Heynen locates in Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis.28 In her reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* she finds that Enlightenment has violent and totalitarian traits, and these have inundated almost every area of reality. The authors substantiate this diagnosis on the basis of developments such as the proliferation of positivism in science and philosophy, the degradation of the individual to the level of being a mere supplier of labor or a consumer, and the media’s continuous belittling of the public.29

The present plight of the museum both continues and encompasses many of these earlier developments. But all of this only serves to demonstrate the crucial significance that a museum that resisted this tendency, and had a certain autonomy of its own, might take on in these circumstances. The idea that there could be such a museum, enacting a critique of society through simultaneous negation and affirmation, is central to my argument here. This would entail a

relationship between museum and world that was analogous and parallel to that of art’s critical role in the world, as conceived by Adorno, and explicated here by Heynen. I have argued throughout the dissertation that it is precisely the deathliness of the institution, its reflection of the world in negative, which has been abandoned, disavowed and rejected in the postmodern period. To take this one step further, it is precisely this mortification of the world that might allow the museum to take a critical stance, simultaneously as it offered hope for a possible future reconciliation. But the question remains of how the museum, as an institution, might enact such a role. And herein lies the crucial link: it would only be able to do so through the agency of art – namely, through the art of architecture. More specifically, it would only be through the ‘useless’, undetermined, irrational moment of such architecture, that part which is excess to function or instrumentality – it would be this still point of autonomy in architecture which would guarantee such a role.

In light of the ‘total catastrophes’ that have been lamentably frequent in the modern period, perpetuated by supposedly ‘enlightened’ nations, the expression of barbarism becomes even more urgent. A Holocaust museum, for instance, can only hold tenuously to the possibility of utopia by giving full expression to the barbarity of the events to which it bears witness. Museums such as this, which deal directly with genocidal histories and thus take death as their subject as well as their object, would surely be the most clear and potent expression of the museum’s more fundamental negativity, deathliness, criticality, and necessary autonomy. By incorporating and ‘enunciating’ the disaster, by ‘taking it into themselves’ in both content and in form, such museums might be the apotheosis and consummation of the museum’s conceptual ‘ruin’, along with its function as a mausoleum.

Such a museum, then, would be a microcosm of Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment: it could only affirm the hope and promise of enlightenment by acknowledging the domination and repression that is its counterpart. The museum would thus represent exactly the ‘irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation’ that Adorno identifies: but only if it was allowed to endure with its deathliness, its mortification of culture, intact.\textsuperscript{30} To

\textsuperscript{30} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, p. 33.
dissolve the museum’s separation from the world, its critical stance that is nevertheless underpinned by real objects from the world, would be both to lose its critical standpoint, and to succumb entirely to the repression of negativity. It would mark the victory of affirmative culture, and thus not just the forgetting, but the legitimation of the suffering of the world.

And this is why the aesthetic is so important in such museums. It is precisely through architecture that an institution might be able to incorporate and materialise – to objectify – the suffering and tragedy of the world. Another way of putting this is that architecture might take a role in mimesis – in the abstracted imitation of deathliness and catastrophe. Heynen has made an important consideration of the role of mimesis in architecture, and the possibility of an autonomous architecture in Adorno’s terms. I will return to her argument shortly. But it is just such a strategy in new, purpose-built museums – of valorising the aesthetics of destruction, of the fragment, the ruin, the collapse – that might stand as a kind of literal, physical incorporation or concretisation of the tragedies of history.

Art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively. A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia. In this image of collapse all the stigmata of the repulsive and loathsome in modern art gather. Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled: This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia – that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise – converges with the possibility of total catastrophe. In the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential, the magical trace of art’s most distant prehistory reappears under the total spell, as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image.31

This last sentence goes to the heart of why the aesthetics of ruination might appear in a museum: to express the institution’s function as, on one level, a kind of atonement, a built apology, an extirpation of guilt. But it could also embody a deeper and more profound engagement: as if the museum ‘wanted to [retrospectively] prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image’. Adorno’s argument that art must be autonomous in order to bear witness to the ‘unfreedom’

31 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 33.
and suffering of the world, both to criticise it and offer hope for an alternative, remains convincing. If the museum retains a certain separation or autonomy from everyday life in the world then it stands in a unique position to both critique and offer hope, to re-present rather than presenting the world. But this would be conditional on the institution’s being able to maintain itself as a discrete realm, and here Adorno’s distrust of the ‘oxymoron’ of art that is ‘simply a thing among other things’, also takes on urgent connotations for the museum. A significant proportion of contemporary museum theory could precisely be described as dedicated to making the museum ‘a space amongst other spaces’. Notwithstanding the fact that part of the legitimate function of museums might be to undermine their own ‘autonomy’, they must also resist instrumentalisation, and retain a space for those irrational and unproductive things which society represses, abandons, or disavows.

What I am proposing here, then, is that deathliness could be to the museum what autonomy is to art: the frame and mechanism through which it could undertake cultural critique. In this conception, museums could stand in a negative, dissonant, unreconciled relationship with life in the world, and enact a critical function analogous to that of autonomous art. To paraphrase Adorno again the museum, through the ‘irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation’, might ‘hold fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled’. This would be a vision of a museum that still contained objects, but which maintained a rigorous scepticism towards the workings of affirmative culture in the world. It would be a museum that anchored its critique through a continued commitment to the objectival and empirical, via artefacts as well as the object character of museum architecture. But while this conception may be a utopian proposal for a new and vital critical role for the museum, it remains to be seen whether this might be possible, or true, at the level of museum objects, the museum institution, or finally, at the level of museum architecture as itself art.

Of course, there are also a number of difficulties in any attempt to formulate a parallel between Adorno’s understanding of autonomous art, in its simultaneously critical and affirmative relationship with empirical reality, and the possibility of a museum with a similarly ambivalent stance in relation to the world. Adorno’s theory may have been a brilliant dialectical reversal, turning the apparent ‘uselessness’ and ‘irrelevance’ of art on its head, but such an inversion is not so
easy with the museum. After all, Adorno’s theory was specifically addressed to autonomous art, and this thesis neither claims that the museum somehow is art, nor that it even allows autonomous art to fulfil its critical potential – Adorno had his own explicit reservations about the way that autonomous art is ‘neutralised’ in art museums, to which I will return shortly.

The museum is an institution, and Adorno’s theory of the social utility of autonomous art could be argued to have no bearing on institutions whatsoever, only holding for the aesthetic realm. Furthermore, any conventional reading of the words ‘institutionalised autonomy’ would see an oxymoron. The idea of a museum being critical has not only been outside the institution’s historically defined role, it has also been outside its capability. Museums have long existed to reflect, celebrate, and most of all to order the world, not to criticise it. But there is a way through these conceptual problems. The stakes are such that it is worth plotting a path through them here.

PROBLEMatisations: THE NEUTRALISATION OF ART’S AUTONOMY IN MUSEUMS

There are precedents for the argument that the museum’s alienation from the world might have some positive effect. Historically, a gap or discontinuity has long existed between the museum and the everyday. This has already been noted in definitions of the museum as heterotopia: a self-contained institution, located in the sacral space of a funereal architecture, and implying certain ritualised modes of behaviour. Indeed, the museum has traditionally been defined as a separate and discrete, if not an autonomous entity; in the same way that it displayed relics of the great and good rather than the minutiae of the everyday lives of the masses, the museum separated its own clean and systematised representation from the grubby and disordered heterogeneity of the world itself. There was unquestionably an aspirational character to this – the populace would go to the museums to see paragons and exemplars, not the reflection of their own lives. But the gap was also based on some problematic assumptions, exclusions, and structures of power, and as the thesis has already noted, it is both rapidly narrowing, and no longer universally regarded as a good thing. The one exception to this is the art museum. In many ways, the art museum has long attempted to project an image of itself as
autonomous, but in a way that, in Adorno’s conception, served specifically to neutralise and defuse the critical function of autonomous art, and to embroil it in a web of dissemblance and complicity with the culture industry. It will be useful here to examine the art museum’s semblance of independence, in order to better see the possibilities for a truly critical museum.

In Adorno’s own terms, autonomous artworks are reified and commodified in art museums, their critical function subjugated to the determinations of the institution. In an art museum, art’s critical function is ‘neutralised’ as the work is locked into an art-historical continuum, reframed as a representation of its artist and period and medium rather than being free to pursue its own particular concerns. Autonomy, according to Adorno, would not be the product of museums, but rather the opposite. Art trapped in the web of the museum, itself an alibi for the overdetermined political and economic contingencies of the world, could no longer maintain the distance to critique its own entrapment. It could be argued that if the critical value of modern art stems from absence, distance and loss being inherent to the work, then its exhibition in a museum that is mausoleum-like, also isolated from life in the world, in effect cancels itself out: in the art museum, art would be twice removed from the world, and its vital link with empirical reality stretched so far as to eventually snap. The ‘preciousness’ (in every sense of the word) that art acquires in art museums, with their quasi-sacral space and modes of display, could thus be read as the mark of a false autonomy. The art museum’s vision of art as transcending life in the world, rather than being bound intimately to it in negativity and critique, would thus be a subversion of true autonomy, cunningly disguised as its support.

This analysis provides a clue to the stake that the art museum might have in preserving and projecting an appearance of autonomy for itself: far from liberating art from the machinations of social and political life, such a false autonomy would render art particularly open to appropriation for ideological ends. This semblance of autonomy would be particularly dangerous because of its concealment of political ends under the very sign of art's independence from the political realm. A key example of this would be the way that art museums apparently transcend the grubby realities of economic exchange, but in fact do no such thing. Art museums may be thought successful in presenting the semblance of autonomy, whilst being
in fact deeply enmeshed in the commodification of art, and the dealings of the culture industry more generally. Following Adorno’s logic, in order to liberate art to a true, authentic autonomy, it would be necessary to release it from the art museum altogether.

There is an important distinction, then, between art museums and other types of museum around this very issue: the art museum attempts to borrow some of the apparent ‘autonomy’ of its very specific contents. It presents an image of itself as independent, and as enshrining, protecting, and even magnifying the autonomy of art. The issue, of course, is whether this is a false claim, and if so, what would be the museum’s interest in making it. One answer is that by fetishising autonomy, by representing itself as an ‘asylum’ for art, the art museum would disguise the double meaning of that term. Certainly art is safe in the museum, and inserted in an environment that is custom-made for it, but it is also thoroughly controlled, regulated, and not at liberty to leave.\textsuperscript{32} This vault or asylum function is particularly underscored, interestingly enough, by purpose-built museum architecture, especially in the mode where the institution is seen to require a particularly ‘art-like’ building to announce, exalt, and celebrate its precious contents.

But what of art in other kinds of museum? Could art retain its autonomy, its critical distance, and its engagement with life in the world if it appeared in a history museum? As a material artefact, art in a history museum would be freed from art history, and from a fetishisation of autonomy that effectively cancelled it out. As an artwork, it would also be freed from the burden of proof and evidence; it would not be a document, but an evocation. The artwork’s ability to oscillate between these two realms might serve to release it from the determinations of both. And if the art museum is focussed inward, cancelling out the true autonomy of art through its very re-framing, there are other kinds of museum that look outward to life in the world. The thesis has already noted the narrowing of the gap between the world and certain other types of museum – of natural history, science, and most appositely social history, for example – and this can now be seen as opening a

\textsuperscript{32} Hence the confusion, secrecy and sometimes scandal of art museums trading parts of their collections on the art market.
potential opportunity, where the critical function of autonomous art might be retained, and even incorporated, within the museum matrix. This becomes complicated when the artwork in question is architectural, when the museum building is itself art, but nevertheless this is one of the principal questions that will be pursued here.

All museums clearly hold the possibility of being, in Wolin’s terms, another ‘weapon’ in the ‘ideological arsenal of legitimation techniques’ that late capitalism marshals to reinforce the ‘omnipresent semblance of well-being’.

It has the potential to be a particularly powerful agent for glossing over the suffering of the world in pursuit of a pacifying semblance of happiness. It could be argued that the art museum, in particular, has already succumbed to this possibility, which can be demonstrated in the way that authentic autonomous art is there engulfed, neutralised, and stripped of its critical stance and social utility. For all of these reasons it is important, even as the distance between the museum and the world narrows ever further, to propose the possibility of autonomy’s re-emergence in a different register.

For the museum to take such a critical stance, museum architecture would necessarily take a key role. It was architecture, previously, that was both the sign and the mechanism of the museum’s separation from the world, it was the museum’s walls that both enacted and symbolised its isolation. In the period where the museum maintained a primary archive function, and was filled with precious objects, its architecture represented this through a solid, vault-like security. But now it is architecture, still symbolically located at the interface between the space of the museum and the space of the world, still mediating between the two albeit through more literally permeable and transparent means, that might facilitate this distance at a discursive rather than physical level.

It is true that the idea of architecture as autonomous is potentially problematic in many ways, and this question has been examined by Heynen, also through Adorno’s terms. Heynen writes that ‘architecture is not an autonomous art form: architecture is always built as the result of a commission from somebody or

other; for reasons of social usefulness it must conform to prevailing expectations.\textsuperscript{34} In spite of this, she goes on to propose, ‘in analogy with Adorno’s argument about the dual character of artworks – that they are both socially determined and autonomous’ that architecture does ‘involve an ‘autonomous moment’.\textsuperscript{35}

It is true of course that architecture, more so than literature or the visual arts, is determined by social factors ... Even so, architecture cannot simply be reduced to a sort of sum total of these factors [namely materials and techniques, context and program]. Giving form to space cannot be reduced to a simple conformity to heteronomous principles, such as functional or constructional requirements, the psychological needs of the users, or the image the building is intended to convey. There is always an autonomous moment in the design process at which an architect is purely and simply occupied with architecture – with giving form to space.\textsuperscript{36}

This autonomous moment, then, would be the point where architecture pursues its own formal media specificity, where it spirals inwards towards that which is irreducible in its own art form, a moment which both precedes and follows its fulfilment of a specific function and a specific architectural program. For Heynen, this embodiment of content and function within an aesthetic moment, the autonomy of architecture as embeddedness in the world that is yet a critique of that world, must be approached through the concept of mimesis. Mimesis here is understood as being much more than simple imitation or depiction; rather it carries the implication of the incorporation of an idea or a condition. For Heynen via Adorno, mimesis offers a way in which the dual character of art and architecture can be understood as a simultaneously affirmative and negative. This makes it possible ‘to see works of art in the perspective of their social definition and social relevance on the one hand (in other words, in terms of their character as denouncing social reality) and on the other hand in the perspective of their autonomy as aesthetically shaped objects.’\textsuperscript{37} In Heynen’s conception, then, the autonomous moment in architecture would be endlessly and inextricably bound together with the building’s fulfilment of a specific program, but would nevertheless exist, even if only fleetingly, for itself. In my own terms, it would be a moment of disinterest within architecture’s

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{34} Heynen, \textit{Architecture and Modernity}, p. 198.
\item\textsuperscript{35} Heynen, \textit{Architecture and Modernity}, p. 198.
\item\textsuperscript{36} Heynen, \textit{Architecture and Modernity}, p. 198-99.
\item\textsuperscript{37} Heynen, \textit{Architecture and Modernity}, p. 192.
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overriding engagement with the world, one could even say a moment of monumentality within architecture’s overriding instrumentality. But as Heynen notes, this moment would not necessarily and automatically enact a critical role.

The question remains … of whether the critical content of architecture coincides with this autonomous moment. It is perhaps necessary to qualify Adorno’s claims on this point. The autonomous moment in architecture certainly can be applied critically, but the critical character is by no means inherent in the autonomous moment. In order to genuinely take on the challenge of critical architecture, the critical content cannot purely and simply act as a noncommittal commentary that only concerns the packaging of the building while not paying any heed to program or content.38

In other words, the autonomous moment in architecture would be subject to exactly the antinomy between freedom and irrelevance, alienation and engagement, that Adorno finds in the critical possibility of art per se. And at this point Heynen’s thesis is even more significant to the present argument, because she illustrates her case for a moment of critical autonomy in architecture through an example where the programmatic content of a building is inextricably intertwined with both its critical content and its art. The building is the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the same example to which I will return in the next chapter as a case study. Heynen’s work thus serves to frame and introduce my own approach to that museum, albeit through slightly different means. She examines the Jewish Museum building as an example of architecture where the mimetic representation of program and content serves to enact a critical function. More than this, the ambiguity and deferral of meaning, emblematised by the building’s void spaces, acts as a negative image, to ‘mimetically expose the negative qualities of reality’.39 She writes that ‘[t]his is how Libeskind’s design for the extension of the Berlin Museum can be understood. No direct image of utopia is offered us here, but the idea of utopia is preserved because we see clearly how great a distance separates our present reality from a utopian condition of reconciliation.’40 I will return to this example, and my own analysis of its negative relation to reality, in the next chapter.

38 Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, p. 199
39 Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, p. 208
40 Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, p. 208
So it is through architecture, in both its art and its material, that the possibilities for a critical, alienated, dissonant museum seem most promising. As the thesis has already noted, museum architecture has an inherent deathliness; this is true at a stylistic level, as well as through concepts of architectural monumentality. But more than this, it seems possible that museum architecture as itself art might have elements of a kind of ‘true’ autonomy of its own – and that it might represent the convergence of deathliness and autonomy, both for itself and also for the institution that it houses. On the one hand it is the objecthood, the concrete material fact of museum architecture that serves to anchor the institution in empirical reality. On the other hand it is the art of museum architecture that both enacts and underscores its critical function. But perhaps most crucially of all, it is the integral and immanent combination of these two, as a kind of built dialectic, which might serve to both embody and encase the catastrophes of the modern age. Adorno writes that ‘scars of damage and disruption are the modern’s seal of authenticity’, and it is precisely these disruptions and disjunctions, these scars and schisms translated into and manifest in architectural form, which the thesis will seek to locate in the two case studies to come. But before that, it is timely to examine the question of whether, how, and to what effect architecture might be regarded as an ‘autonomous’ artform, and how this might bear upon its object character, and its mode of being art.

AUTONOMOUS ARCHITECTURE, OR ART AS EXCESS TO INSTRUMENTALITY

It is both interesting and significant that many of the most prestigious, expensive, and importantly the most architecturally adventurous buildings to be constructed in the past twenty years have been museums. The idea – or rather the image – of autonomy may also provide an explanation for the conspicuous ‘artfulness’, as well as the sheer lavishness, of such museums. This is true in the sense that, as the thesis noted earlier, it is the explicit pursuit of the formal, media specific, ‘useless’ purposes of art itself, rather than other, external determinations, that the work

\[41\] Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 23.
identifies itself as autonomous – as existing above all for the purposes of art *per se*. This idea has been well articulated by Gregg Horowitz who, in paraphrasing Kant, writes that:

>[T]he work of art appears as the look of free labor, of labor having freed itself from what makes labor necessary. This appearance is indeed the result of labor but of labor not tethered to any extrinsic goal. The artwork is the appearance of unnecessary work. In being unnecessary, the artwork is the appearance of the absence of external determination; in this way, the artwork appears like nature, which is now to say that, like the system of nature, nothing outside it determines it. Put most simply, then, the work of art is autonomous when it appears as an internally complete system.\(^\text{42}\)

If autonomous art can be understood as ‘the result of labour not tethered to any extrinsic goal’, then this is also revealing of how and where architecture can be recognised as an art. Architecture, with its pursuit of higher aesthetic and conceptual ideals, is commonly defined in opposition to building, as a purely utilitarian pursuit. It is the presence or absence of art that plots the line of demarcation between the two. But the things produced by building and by architecture are both buildings. How is it then that one is art and the other is not? And where exactly is this art located?

While architecture is still generally recognised as an art form, this designation is often quite vague. It is not always clear whether a building itself can constitute an art object, or whether the process of designing and materialising it constitutes an art process, or indeed whether it is the individual’s experience of moving through and around the building constitutes a performative art ‘work’. These are large, philosophical questions, which can not be definitively answered here. But one proposition is that architecture can be identified by precisely the ‘look of free labour’ that Horowitz describes. Historically this has most often been signified through ornament – that which is explicitly excess to function, or structure, or any of the myriad other determinations to which architecture is subject. Ornament has been the sign of architecture’s transcendence, even if only partial, of instrumentality. It could be argued that in the modern period, as the role and prevalence of ornament has decreased, this same role has been manifest in other

FIGURE 9: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao. Art in architecture as the ‘look of free labour’.
ways; in the exaggeration of tectonic construction, or in expressionist form, for example. But whichever mode it has taken, a building that conspicuously marks itself out as exceeding a means-end relationship has also staked a claim for itself as being, to some degree at least, both ‘autonomous’ and ‘art’.

This becomes particularly interesting in the idea that certain building programs, and even certain genres of building, require more ‘art’ than others. The most obvious example here would be the architectural monument – that which has no conventional ‘function’ at all, other than representation and commemoration, and therefore which is free to pursue its own concerns unfettered by instrumentality. As I have already noted, another crucial example would be the art museum, and although the ideology behind this is somewhat suspect, the elaborateness and ‘appearance of free labour’ in such buildings is revealing.

Of course, as I have already noted, the question of whether architecture could ever be ‘autonomous’ in Adorno’s sense, of being detached from and thus critical of the world, is complex. The philosophical prejudice against architecture is an old one: its grounded, earthly materiality and its necessary marriage to function making it seem more of an object and less of an artwork. For a Western aesthetic tradition steeped in German metaphysics, the more immaterial the artwork, the closer it comes to transcendence and pure spirit. Any ‘interest’ in the actual workings of the world, let alone an actual facilitation of them such as architecture enacts, would in these terms always be a compromise.

Architecture appears to be the most literally objectival – the biggest, the heaviest, the most subject to gravity – of all the arts. But architecture’s unique artefactuality, its re-forming and re-ordering of the material of the world at the most tangible and affecting scale, also opens a range of possibilities. In particular, it has an inherent address or relation to the beholder, in spite – or even because – of its being, as Benjamin famously noted, apprehended in a state of distraction.43 Concepts of three-dimensional space as the real ‘material’ of architecture, and of this space only being animated by a beholder’s movement in time, have been long accepted, indeed central aspects of architectural practice in the modern period. In

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this respect, architectural theory is quite different from that of the other arts; while there has long been a prejudice against describing, criticising or analysing art in phenomenological terms, this general approach has long been established in architectural discourse. And it is precisely in this dimension of object character as subjectively experienced, in space and over time, that its relevance to architecture is most pronounced.

From the Beaux Arts tradition of the marché, through Le Corbusier’s idea of a building as solidified around a promenade architecturale, to Siegfried Giedion’s idea that time is the fourth dimension of architecture – the experience of the peripatetic, mobile human subject moving within the building has been a central concern of architectural design. The very notion that architecture could ever not acknowledge its beholder, or rather its user, is in fact entirely problematic. After all, buildings address their occupants in the mute language of ergonomics, accommodating the shape, orientation and scale of the human body in a kind of inherent anthropomorphism. And the acknowledgement of time as fundamental to architecture – whether the ambient effects of sunlight changing through the course of a day, or the changing perspective of the beholder moving through a space – is also an acknowledgement that architecture is subject to the contingencies of its situation, that it is embedded within the phenomenal world. On the one hand these characteristics could (and historically have) be taken as proof of the fact that architecture is not autonomous – that it is dissolved within and corrupted by life in the world. But another way of seeing this is that architecture has an inherent and inescapable artefactuality which exists regardless of – or more significantly, simultaneous with – its status as an art.

Architecture has a place amongst the arts, that is universally acknowledged; but historically it has been located well down in the hierarchy. There is little doubt that as well as being inevitably woven into the material of the world, and being deeply engaged with human experience and activity, architecture is also enmeshed in the political, social and economic contingencies of the world as well. Rarely can it rise above such concerns, given that its scale, complexity, and sheer expense inevitably make it subject to a range of determinations that the other arts do not know. It also establishes a specific subject/object relationship, and addresses its beholders in a way that Fried might have described as ‘theatrical’.
CHAPTER FIVE
Alienation and Negativity: The Critical Function of Autonomous Art

Architecture is not autonomous art in the sense that Adorno valorised – it is far from independent of the instrumentalisation and over-determination of late capitalist society. But none of this is to say that architecture might not have a mode of weak or diluted autonomy unique to itself, that it might still have elements that are excess to function and instrumentality. All of these questions — of the ambivalent object character of architecture, interlaced with how and where architecture is an art, why certain building types require more art than others, and how architecture might enact a critical function — will be explored in the two case study chapters to follow. But first it is necessary to explain how these specific museums present another kind of limit condition to the institution, and museum architecture, as a whole.

PART THREE: IMPOSSIBLE HISTORIES AND LOST OBJECTS: THE LIMITS OF THE MUSEUM

Museum architecture presents an intensification of the crisis of the museum object, both because the nature of its own object character is unclear, and also because it doubles the question of the museum object by being both the museum object and a museum object — both form and contents of the museum, a mechanism for display and an object displayed. This provides the opportunity to examine distinctions between artwork and artefact through the line between architecture and building, and allows an examination of the object character of museum architecture, which bears upon architectural experience and architectural affect equally as it raises questions of architectural monumentality. In the next two chapters, these questions will be examined with specific reference to the Jewish Museum, Berlin, by architect Daniel Libeskind, and the National Museum of Australia (NMA), Canberra, by architects Ashton Raggatt MacDougall.

These specific objects were arrived at through a search for the point at which the museum’s logic of artefact-based, evidential representation fails. There might be many possible examples of such inadequacy, but the thesis will concentrate on one particular, relatively new genre of museum that is solely concerned with human social and political history. It will be argued that this limit condition, both of historical artefact and also, importantly, of museum architecture, is manifest on several levels. There are cases where there are simply insufficient
surviving artefacts to materially reconstruct or represent a given history; where all that is left is absence. There are also cases where historical events are so contested and politicised that a stable, ‘objective’ interpretation or idea of the truth is not possible. Finally, there are cases where artefacts, or indeed any category of objects, are simply inadequate, where historical events defeat representation altogether because of their heinous or exceptional character. Taken together, these three categories might be gathered under the heading of ‘impossible’ histories.

The idea of an ‘impossible’ history opens into three questions: of when, how, and for whom it might be impossible. Given that this dissertation springs from a position at the intersection of museology and museum architecture, such questions must be answered from that specific standpoint. Beginning with the temporal, then, both of the case studies – the Jewish Museum and the NMA – were completed within the last decade of the twentieth century, but are primarily focussed on histories that occurred many years, even centuries earlier. But these museums also share an emphasis on the experience of the beholder, on the visiting museum subject in the present day – they are concerned with the repercussions and reverberations of troubled and troubling histories in the now. It is true that an important aspect of this strategy is the evocation of empathy, of a personal identification between the present-day museum-goer and the people, particularly the victims, of a distant past. But the constructive, ultimately forward-looking bias of these museums means that simply mourning the past is not enough, and the point is to affect the beholder in the present, and thus to project forward into the future. So the questions of when and for whom these histories are impossible is quite straightforward – they are impossible for the beholder in the present, as they move through a building that will also endure into the future.

The question of how such histories might be impossible is a little more complex. There is something to be said here about the nature of, and relationship between, three different levels of historical dissonance or impossibility. To begin with, there is the question of absence, of a simple lack of surviving artefacts: what should the museum do in cases where the artefacts witnessing a particular event have not been regarded as sufficiently important to collect? Or when the event or thing in question was ephemeral, and did not produce anything collectable? Or, more pointedly, what of cases where artefacts have been deliberately not collected,
or deliberately destroyed? In this last case, the political and ideological implications of absence become much clearer. When there are no objectival or material remains, the question of what actually happened is left particularly open to conjecture. And while there is a certain poetic resonance to the idea of the lost object, the reasons why it became lost in the first place, and the ends to which the object *as lost* can be directed in museums, mean it bears much closer scrutiny.

The second level of historical impossibility might be labelled as *contested*, and might be described as historical acts, attitudes, and policies that the shifting tide of political opinion has come to find unacceptable, criminally culpable, or even simply embarrassing. Often such events have been suppressed or excluded from established historical narratives for just these reasons. Whether through an attempt to objectively acknowledge what actually occurred, or a more politicised retrospective analysis, the point of working through such a difficult history would be, in part, a simple matter of redressing inaccuracies and omissions in the historical record. Such histories are rarely broached without controversy, and those who attempt to address or redress them are routinely accused of relativism, revisionism, and political correctness gone mad. Nevertheless, the drive to openly face a difficult history, and importantly also to undertake this at the level of architecture, is inherent to both the Jewish Museum and the NMA.

**UNPRESENTABLE HISTORIES AND HOLOCAUST HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Much has been written about the last of the three levels of impossibility, which might be labelled *unpresentable* histories, particularly in relation to the history and memory of the Holocaust. This discourse encompasses material history as well as oral testimony, psychological studies of trauma and its aftermath, and significantly also, amongst other things, the role of art in attempting to represent and commemorate the unthinkable. The literature is too large for this dissertation to enter in any but the smallest way, but the contention that the only adequate or appropriate response to the enormity and horror of such events is silence, that loss and emptiness itself is the only possible representation, is pervasive, and remains convincing. But for the purposes of this dissertation – while it would be quite possible to concentrate solely on what might be called the metaphysical aspects of such a history, particularly through theories of mourning and melancholy – these
broader questions must be acknowledged and then passed over. What can be noted here, however, is that this third, most extreme manifestation of an impossible history contains both of the other levels as well – and that in many ways they are each mutually inhering and reinforcing of one another. The problem of the lost object, the lack and absence of artefacts, intersects with the problem of contested histories, where the ‘true’ interpretation of objects is constantly under revision, and these two intersect again with the inadequacy of objects, in representing events that can seem to exceed or stand outside of history altogether.

To return to the question of how a given history might be – or might become – impossible, then, the beginnings of an answer have been loosely sketched here. The dissertation is concerned with pursuing an argument through a very specific aperture – two specific works of purpose-built museum architecture, in their particular contexts, and with all of their attendant problematics. It has been argued that both the Jewish Museum and the NMA are each suffused with aspects of such impossibility, in contents and form: it is incorporated as the ‘content’ of museum architecture, equally as it forms and informs museum objects and the objects of the museum. An examination of the strategies that these museums employ, in architectural, museological, and historiographic terms, opens questions not only of the problematics of historical representation, but also the stance that a museum can take in relation to historical events as well as their repercussions for society in the present day. Museums dealing with impossible histories are, by definition, engaged in a critique and re-evaluation of a conventional retelling of history. Furthermore, through an awareness of their own ‘construction’ of history, they can enact a self-reflexive critique of the traditional museum apparatus itself.

The objective presentation of fact has long been the museum’s ideal, but postmodern historiography, with its tendency towards relativism and subjectivity, raises the question of how historical truth – as law – is ever to be represented, recasting history itself as the eternally absent ‘lost object’. One could argue that history is always, to some extent, unrepresentable, at a structural level: that the past is always irretrievable, that historical truth itself is eternally unknowable, and that all history museums are faced with these issues whether they address them explicitly or not. In this conception history as a discourse is always, to a certain extent, engaged in the evocation of loss. If the presentation of the past is impossible,
however, its representation is made possible by metonymically substituting the enduring physical presence of historical objects for the intangibility of time passed, in the same way that a monument literally ‘stands in’ for the past. This is the strategy of the history museum: constructing history from the traces, fragments, and objects that endure.

If the impossibility of actually being there provides the ever-present but unspoken condition of the museum, this too is precisely what the architectural monument commemorates. At its most existential level, a monument is an acknowledgement of the inevitability of the death and disappearance of all things, at the hands of the obliterating force of time. To the extent that all history museums re-present events past and people dead, they all have a monumental function, in calling attention to temporal distance, that is, the pastness of the past. While the role of the museum may be to uncover and re-present history in the present, this work is underwritten by a dialectic of absence and presence, intangible loss and enduring monument, as the conceptual foundation upon which the history museum is built. To a certain extent this simply marks the structural distinction between history and the past - since history is written in the present to express a desire for the past, and as Kurt Forster writes, ‘there is no objective past, constant over time, but only a continual refraction of the absent in the memory of the present.’ The traditional museum is powerless to represent the intangibility of loss and absence as such, and bald representations of historical fact are not always equal to the task of commemoration, especially in the case of tragic histories. The museum which attempts to re-present an impossible history is thus a particularly exaggerated, emotive, and politically fraught working-through of the issues of monumentality and memory which underlie the very concept of the history museum, as well as the contested status of the museum object itself. The very monumentality, the monumental presence, of museum architecture thus takes on an important role in the framing of history.

Many museums, these days, do not foreground objects and collections as their raison d’etre. But in the case of the two case study museums this lack, or

problematisation, is different. I would argue that the specific and unique historical circumstances of these two museums mean that in each case the object character of the architecture overcompensates for the lack of a significant collection. They are the exceptions that prove the rule – museums (relatively) without objects, which nevertheless affirm the primacy of objects for museums.

The proposition here, then, is that it is precisely at the point where historical artefacts are defeated, that the possibilities emerge for art – and specifically architecture as an art – in the museified representation of history. Furthermore, it is proposed that artworks, as non-evidential forms of representation, have the potential to step into the breach created by the ruinous effects of historical events themselves. This proposition shifts all of the questions already asked of the museum object into a different register – if an artwork can represent history, then how does it reconcile its status as art with its artefactuality or object character? Is it only because of art’s autonomy that it can stand in for the unpresentable? Does the presence of artworks in a history museum represent a new use-value for art, a reconciliation between art and life, the transcendent and the engaged, the abstract and the material? These questions are made more complex again when crossed with the object character of architecture, especially as manifest in ideas of monumentality. Such questions open ever outwards, and are among the further implications of the thesis overall.

CONCLUSION
Authentic, autonomous art, following Adorno, is always already decontextualised, and derives its critical stance from this perpetual state of isolation. Much as the artists and theorists of the historical avant-garde may have railed against it, the authentic autonomous artwork in the modern period is a homeless object. From the moment of its creation, it is necessarily and inevitably alienated from the social and political conditions that gave rise to it. It has moved irrevocably away from the tradition of art as an integral part of human activity, tied up in the rituals and events of everyday life, of the kind discussed through Quatremerè de Quincy in chapter three. And it is precisely because of this inherent decontextualisation that autonomous art maintains a certain critical distance from the world; absence, distance and loss are immanent within the work. Authentic autonomous art enacts
its critical function by *incorporating* the gap between its own autonomous self and the unreconciled world, and elevating this scar to a formal principle.

A belief in the mausoleum character of museums is now orthodox; that much is clear. In the contemporary literature it is very often anchored and authorised with the very same famous quotation from Adorno’s ‘Valery Proust Museum’ essay that the thesis has already examined in depth. But given that the postmodern critique of institutions is specifically engaged in challenging orthodoxies, why has this particular case not been further examined or challenged? Could it be because the affirmative culture that Adorno so distrusted is now dominant, to the extent that a logic of negation, of the negative dialectically inhere within the positive, has unravelled into a simple dichotomy of ‘good’ lively museum and ‘bad’ mausoleum? And to push the idea even further, could it be that what is being designated and decried as the museum’s mausoleum character is in fact something like autonomy – in the sense of being the institution’s only means to negate or resist affirmative culture? Deathliness may be to museums as autonomy is to art. But museums might also achieve a kind of autonomy of their own, through the monumental, deathly art of their architecture.

The collapsing of barriers between museum and world is at once an attempt to make the museum a ‘thing among other things’, and also, conversely, a process of aestheticisation. The problem with ‘lively’ museums is their affirmation of culture as it stands, because this glosses over the tragedy of history. What is needed is a critical institution, which not only acknowledges history as loss and melancholy, but also specifically opposes any culture that sets out to be affirmative of present conditions. This is true even if it means an institution that negates itself. The museum will never be entirely contiguous with the world, because it will always be both a representation and a re-framing; for this reason, and despite the best efforts of the New Museology, it will only ever have a semblance of ‘liveliness’, in the full sense as I have discussed throughout the dissertation. The museum will always and inevitably retain a certain deathliness. This must be recognised if all of the old problems of the museum, or the problems of the old museum, are not to be repeated in reverse. The necessary ‘ruination’ enacted by postmodern critique must be doubled by the much older ‘ruination’ inherent to the institution. And while
populism can be seen as a sign of the first of these, allegory is the sign of the second.

Adorno is adamant that the irrationality, indeterminacy and lack of instrumentality of autonomous art is in fact its most useful characteristic – it is only by virtue of its lack of practical utility that art acquires a social utility. In light of this, it is also possible to approach the ‘usefulness’ of museums in a new way. It is axiomatic that museums in the postmodern age are under increasing pressure to justify their existence in terms of specific functions – education, entertainment, and nation building being just three of the most obvious. But the question remains of whether there could also be a value, for museums, in the critique of utility, and in uselessness itself.
CHAPTER SIX

Presenting the Unpresentable: Allegories of Destruction at the Jewish Museum in Berlin

The ruin carries the image of the destruction that the past necessarily suffers on its way to the present. Destruction ingrains itself so deeply in the physiognomy of the ruin that the latter embodies the destruction by which it is remembered. Each ruin is its own apocalypse in reverse, a destruction that builds a memorial. The ruin embodies the damage incurred by time's journey into the present, a damage without which the past does not exist. This is reflected in Goethe's insight that "ruins are monuments of themselves": a ruin is both the historical thing and its historical transmission. Similarly, the past is always a ruin since it is inconceivable to think of the past as existing otherwise than in its damaged state in the present.¹

Didier Maleuvre

In an age when the museum has often been touted as the replacement for the temple, where people go to spend their weekends worshipping at the altar of (valuable) artefacts, the Holocaust museum takes on a special quasi-religious status which see the creation of a new building type, part memorial, part library, part school and part museum, all bound together by an atmosphere of compulsory pilgrimage and sacrality. If the museum has become a metaphor for a post-modern culture of memory, then the Holocaust museum has a special place.²

Edwin Heathcote

FIGURE 10: Jewish Museum, Berlin.
INTRODUCTION: MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE AS FRAME

The long-anticipated Jewish Museum in Berlin was completed and opened to visitors between the beginning of 1999 and the end of 2000. That it was visited by no fewer than 350,000 people during that time would not be surprising at all, if it weren’t for the fact that during that period the building was entirely empty – it contained no exhibits, no displays, and no objects other than the building itself.³ It functioned as neither an archive, nor an educational facility, and it could not have been entertaining in any conventional sense either. What, then, drew those thousands of visitors to the museum? What did they expect to see, and what did they take away? What did they experience within those empty spaces? That these visits had the character of a pilgrimage is clear. That the only thing drawing people to the museum was the building itself is also clear, as is the fact that the building took an active role in commemoration and the provocation of affect. But most importantly, this episode reveals some important truths about the present state and future possibilities of the museum institution. In particular, it is particularly significant that the Jewish Museum was so ‘popular’ at this time, in the sense that it attracted so many visitors.

The act of constructing a new building to contain history gives rise to a range of questions that are different from those provoked by museums that occupy historic, or even simply extant, buildings. In recasting architecture as a deliberate frame around the presentation of history, it abandons the fiction of the ‘white box’, the idea of architecture as a neutral ground, and represents the incursion of architecture into the realm of historiography. Of course, such an incursion is not without difficulties. Apart from having to fulfil a specific functional brief, architecture is an abstract, literally conventional art that is unsuited to figurative representation. Analogies between architecture and language have a lineage of their own, but architecture could never have the specificity of meaning of written or spoken

language.  

Anthony Vidler has written that architecture is ‘an art whose repertory of signification is essentially limited.’

Unlike sculpture, painting, and the other arts, architecture’s forms are abstract, generalized, and vague, in comparison to words or visual signs, and suitable thereby to convey ideas of a similar generality and vagueness... Architecture is thereby bound from the start to a fate that denies it the possibility of expressing any but the most general ideas of a culture, and these in a fundamentally inflexible and often ambiguous way.  

In light if this, the ways in which a building might attempt to express its newly anointed role in the framing of history seem limited at best, and fraught with pitfalls. But all of this makes Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum extension to the Berlin museum all the more significant, since the building itself manages to be figurative without being painfully literal, commemorative without being bombastic, and engaging without resorting to a clunky ‘interactivity’. The fact that it is the building that manages all of this is both remarkable and significant, and demonstrates that the line where the building stops and the museum apparatus begins becomes ever more blurred.

The Jewish Museum project has generated an enormous amount of publicity and criticism in architectural circles since its inception in 1988. In all of this, though, there has been little comment from the point of view of its genre, that is, the building as a museum. Perhaps this is partly because, as I have already noted, the building was first opened as an empty shell and remained this way until its final installation and re-opening in September 2001, nearly three years after its practical completion. But rather than defeating a discussion of the building as a museum, this merely serves to underscore the starting point of this chapter - that

4 Anthony Vidler locates one of the earliest theories of architecture as language in the work of Victor Hugo. Hugo’s famous pronouncement, in the novel Notre Dame de Paris of 1831, that printed literature would be the death of architecture is seen by Vidler as advancing ‘a theory of architecture based not on structure but on writing, of architecture as a means of expression, as a piling up of culturally charged signs that the historian is able to decipher…’ Vidler continues, ‘It should be noted that this idea of architecture as writing, as a kind of primitive language… was a relatively new idea… The idea of classical architecture, which had never seen itself as a language, but only as a system of building conforming to laws of beauty, was now definitely superseded by an idea of architecture as expression. The role of architecture “to construct” was gradually reconstructed to that of “to speak”.’ Anthony Vidler, ‘Notes on the Sublime: From Neoclassicism to Postmodernism’, in Princeton Journal, vol. 3, 1988, pp. 172-173.

this museum is much more than a simple receptacle for objects, or space for their
display. The building is not only the museum object, it is also itself a museum
object, and a highly invested commemorative one at that - it is not only the form,
but also part of the content. With its vertiginous spatial effects, its punctured zinc
planes and gashed slits for windows, it is also an austerely beautiful object, that is
nevertheless designed to hold both the memory and the evidence of some of the
most unspeakable historical events ever recorded, events which are commonly felt
to 'defeat' representation altogether. This chapter will contend that the aesthetic
aspect of the building, as a work of art, stands in a vital critical tension with the
museum's historiographic function, and that this must be taken into account in its
critical and theoretical appraisal.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, the building is
addressed in a specifically architectural and stylistic context, in its response to the
legacy of Nazi architecture in Berlin, as an anti-classical gesture. It will be argued
that the museum is opposed to the negative associations that classicism took on
following its appropriation by the Nazis for explicitly political purposes. It can thus
be framed in specific opposition to the propagandist neo-classicism of architects
such as Paul Troost and Albert Speer. The museum also opposes the idealist
doctrine that made classicism attractive to the Nazis in the first place: its aspiration
to totalised unity, closure, and completion – all of which, not incidentally, are
characteristics of architectural monumentality. It will argue that Libeskind attempts

\[6\] It must be stated clearly at the outset that I am not suggesting all Nazi architecture was
Neoclassical: there was no single 'Nazi style', and the various other styles employed by the
party in industrial building, infrastructural works, private houses, and public housing were
also political. The fact that I wish to concentrate on those aspects of Nazi state architecture
which did adopt the Neoclassical idiom is simply because these were, arguably, the most
explicitly 'heroic' and political, and the most directly engaged in architectural affect. On the
problems with this characterisation of Nazi Neo-classicism, see Wolfgang Schache, 'Nazi
81-88. On the eclecticism of the Nazi architectural program, see Kenneth Frampton, 'A
Synoptic View of the Third Reich', Oppositions 12, Spring 1978, pp 54-87. And on the Nazi
use of Neo-classicism for explicitly political purposes, see Robert R Taylor, The Word in
Wilson, 'Speer and the Fear of Freedom', The Architectural Review 173, no. 1036, June

\[7\] See Albert Speer – Architecture, ed. Leon Krier, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, Brussels,
1985; Leon Krier, "Forwards, Comrades, We Must Go Back," Oppositions, vol. 24, Spring
1981, pp. 27-37; and Joan Ockman's refutation 'The Most Interesting Form of Lie,
a subversion of the ideals of classicism, and of the ‘totalitarian’ aspects of architectural monumentality, by employing the practical and metaphorical associations of the fragment and the ruin. The Jewish Museum will be examined as a deliberately ‘ruined’ monument, a constructed ruin.

The second section of the chapter will employ Walter Benjamin’s theory of Baroque allegory, and his concept of the ruin as an allegory of allegory itself, to pursue a contrast between the allegorical process and practice of the Jewish Museum and the symbolic romanticism of Albert Speer’s theory of architectural ‘ruin-value’. Speer’s theory is hardly a developed critical position, and in fact little more than an anecdote, but it will serve here to illustrate the argument. The experience of temporality and mortality projected by both the monument and the ruin, as they are understood quite differently by Speer, Benjamin, and Libeskind, will be particularly examined with reference to aesthetic affect. The transience and tragedy of Benjamin’s vision of the ruin will be contrasted with the submersion of the individual in the timelessness both of Speer’s buildings and their projected ruins. The value of allegory here is as an aesthetic device that also transcends aesthetics, and thus provides a methodology by which the allegorist can cross between the realms of history and of art, and between the poles of destruction and redemption.

In the third and final section of the chapter, Benjamin’s allegorical method is carried over into an analysis of the complex interpenetration of architecture and museum apparatus in the Jewish Museum, and of its employment of aesthetic affect. The Jewish Museum is thus found to demonstrate a complex and sophisticated overlap between the roles of museum, monument and memorial, and a meditation on the museum’s role in both embodying and containing memory. It can be seen as, in Benjamin’s sense, a monument that was always already ‘destroyed’ by the events of a catastrophic history. The aesthetic thus serves to bring to presentation historical truths that defeat both historiography and the museum apparatus itself.
THE ETHICAL AND THE AESTHETIC

Before delving into the complexities of this social and architectural history, it is perhaps wise to make a more strenuous justification for venturing into the dangerous overlap between the ethical and the aesthetic. Any attempt to analyse a phenomenon deeply engaged in the political and historical realm in anything other than political and historical terms risks being read as a trivialisation of the ‘real’ moral issue, or worse, as a justification of heinous crimes. This is particularly true of an analysis based in aesthetics, which is often taken, falsely, to imply that appearance can be divorced with impunity from content. Many of the issues of the political culpability of architecture have already been played out in reference to Speer’s work, which will serve to clarify some concepts in this chapter, but which is in itself highly problematic. Speer has been largely excluded from the architectural canon on the grounds that the political program of his work remains somehow inherent in its material. Architectural history, with the notable exception of Leon Krier’s efforts at historical rehabilitation, has tended to relegate Speer’s oeuvre to a historical footnote on Nazi megalomania.  

To a large extent the danger is inherent in the material, since both the Jewish Museum and Speer’s works occupy the same ambiguous field: if Speer’s architecture manifests the fascist aestheticisation of politics described by Walter Benjamin, Libeskind’s museum is a meditation on the politics of the aesthetic. And therein lies the justification for their juxtaposition here. Libeskind’s museum must be framed as a specifically anti-Nazi and anti-classical gesture. The building directs its opposition not simply to the stylistic attributes of classicism, but to its signification of an innate, totalitarian form of monumentality. It should be noted that while there is a strong case for conceiving the Jewish Museum as a reaction against the kind of architecture of which Speer’s is an extreme example, there is

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also one significant commonality in their architectural strategies. This is the emphasis each places on the ability of architecture, or more specifically the ruin, to create aesthetic affect. If Libeskind’s museum works by provoking an emotional and psychological disturbance in the visitor in the name of empathy, even piety, Speer had already used the same palette of architectural devices to produce effects for the quite different purpose of intimidation and political subjection.

PART ONE: THE JEWISH MUSEUM AS ANTI-CLASSICAL, ANTI-NAZI GESTURE

The Jewish Museum represents a convergence of the discourses of historiography, museology, through the aesthetic language of architecture. In the context of Germany this necessarily involves the unique problems of postwar historiography, which centre particularly around the Holocaust, debating ‘the exceptionality of the event, its representability, its (un)speakability, ...[and] its very (in)comprehensibility’. While the museum is not a Holocaust museum, and its original brief specifically required that Jewish history be displayed in the context of German history, the Holocaust is nevertheless positioned at its philosophical centre. I will be reading the museum as, at base, a meditation on the difficulties of representing such a traumatic history in architectural form. A large body of scholarship continues to question the ability of architecture or any expression of culture to adequately represent and thus memorialise the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe. The Jewish museum thus represents the state of social and cultural memory in contemporary Berlin, more than fifty years after the war’s end.

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11 Contemporary German struggles with history and memory reached a climax shortly before the original museum competition, with the German and American controversy over President Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery in 1985, and the so-called Historikerstreit or Historians Struggle in the summer of 1986. This latter was a high profile public debate, played out in Germany's major newspapers, and consisted essentially of a polemic between the liberal historical position taken by Jurgen Habermas and the relativising or normalising view of Nazi
The complexity of this state continues to increase, rather than subsiding over time, since the initial trauma of the event has been gradually compounded by the impossibility of assimilating it in epistemological, historical, or theological terms.\textsuperscript{12}

The museum might also be regarded as an expression of a particular historical moment, where architectural style met critical theory, in the convergence of deconstruction and critical postmodernism. The movement known as Deconstruction in architecture has been particularly engaged in enunciating and realising postmodern theory, in the form of what I have already identified as the ‘discourse of ends’, and also in its corollary the ‘apocalyptic tone’ as identified by Jacques Derrida.\textsuperscript{13} Casting the postmodern condition as one of crisis and rupture, the experience of the contemporary metropolis as one of anxiety, schizophrenia, and spatial fear, deconstruction seeks a suitable crisis from which to enact its own cathartic rupture in the history of architecture. There is perhaps a certain ghoulishness in this tendency, a trace of the ambulance chaser; the blithe appropriation of catastrophic events, and their translation into metaphoric terms, could be read as an opportunistic search for a readymade profundity.

The contemporary theorists who engage in a postmodern apocalyptic tone fail to agree on the ‘real’ beginning of the end, but each seeks a suitably ‘spectacular’ moment to symbolically mark the shattering of modernism, and the corresponding birth of the postmodern. The bombing of Hiroshima, and the moment when Mutually Assured Destruction was ‘achieved’ during the cold war, are each identified as such moments by different architect-theorists.\textsuperscript{14} The

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\textsuperscript{12} It has proven similarly impossible to initiate the processes of collective mourning that Germany might have been expected to undergo after the war's end. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's groundbreaking psychoanalytic study \textit{The Inability to Mourn}, applies Freud's theories on mourning to post-war German society. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, \textit{The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behaviour}, translated Beverly Placzek, Grove Press, New York, 1975.

\textsuperscript{13} See Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic tone..."

\textsuperscript{14} Mark Taylor takes Hiroshima as the end, while Derrida and Eisenman choose nuclear annihilation. See Mark Taylor, "Nuclear Architecture or Fabulous Architecture or Tragic
paradigmatic case, however, is Charles Jencks’ choice of the demolition by implosion of the Pruitt Igoe scheme as the end of the modernist project. Symbolising tragic disillusionment and the failure of Utopian ideals, this event also indulged a certain sublime pleasure in the aesthetics of destruction.

Libeskind’s Jewish Museum clearly adopts the apocalyptic tone, and indeed there is a cyclic elegance in the enfoldling of the discourse of ends within the theoretical program of this museum. By explicitly identifying the Holocaust as the end of modernism, the end of the enlightenment project, and so the end of history, Libeskind collects all of the catastrophic pronouncements of the discourse of ends within one event. Gathering the apparently ‘ruined’ or declining institutions of architecture, museum and history, he may well have compounded, and thus signalled the end of the discourse itself.

THE JEWISH MUSEUM AS PROJECT

In 1988, the competition to design a new Jewish Museum wing as an extension to the Berlin Museum was announced. The site was on Lindenstrasse, at the southern end of then West Berlin, in an area adjacent to the still extant Berlin Wall. In 1989 the competition was judged and Daniel Libeskind’s entry declared the winner. The programme required that the new extension be entered through the original museum, housed next door in the Collegienhaus, a former Baroque palace reconstructed in 1735, and that it place Jewish history in Berlin in the context of German history. Libeskind’s entry, described by the jurors as ‘an extraordinary,
completely autonomous solution', followed a precarious course over the next ten years, enduring design changes required to reduce the budget from an estimated construction cost of DM 178.5 million to the budgeted amount of DM 77 million, several occasions when the project was almost abandoned, dramatic political upheaval with the fall of the Wall and the decision to reunite Germany with Berlin as its capital, and controversy over the appointment of curatorial staff. Construction continued slowly throughout the nineties, with the cornerstone being laid on November 9, 1992, and the project finally completed on 25 January 1999.

The finished product is a five storey, angular, zinc-clad volume, a zig-zag in plan, with the shortest façade fronting, and indeed protruding into, Lindenstrasse. The fenestration is a series of gashed slits in the riveted zinc skin, their positions and trajectories apparently derived from Libeskind’s plotting of significant addresses on a map of pre-war Berlin, as I will discuss below. The building’s urban scale is humble, in works in context with the neighbouring Collegienhaus, and is dwarfed by a number of neighbouring 12 to 15 storey postwar apartment blocks. The museum is surrounded by gardens carefully integrated with the architectural program, but can not be entered directly from outside; the visitor must pass through the original museum and a choice of three tunnel-like corridors, one leading straight to the main stairway into the extension, another to the ‘Holocaust void’, and a third outside to the E.T.A Hoffman garden.

Libeskind calls the Jewish Museum project ‘Between the Lines’, and it is from the between the inextricably entangled lines of German and Jewish history that it speaks. These two intersecting ‘lines’ are expressed in the plan, quite literally representing German history as violently disjointed but continuous, and Jewish history embedded within it, straight but catastrophically interrupted. Libeskind himself has described the building as an ‘emblem’, and on a very literal level he presents the Star of David in the building’s plan, albeit in a broken and abstracted form, as a belated answer to the swastika and the Imperial eagle.

FIGURE 11: Jewish Museum, Berlin.
The unbroken tradition of Jewish religion and culture may have been horribly scarred by the events of the Second World War, but it was far from destroyed, and there is a grim affirmation written into the very plan of the museum. Libeskind has described four starting points for his scheme, points that are themselves a series of unrelated fragments from outside the discipline of architecture.\textsuperscript{19} The star was generated by plotting the addresses of prominent Jewish and German citizens on a map of pre-war Berlin, and joining these points into an 'irrational and invisible matrix'.\textsuperscript{20} This irrationality itself is a transgression of the ideals of classical architecture, and it is compounded by Libeskind's three other 'texts': the libretto and score of Arnold Schönberg's unfinished opera, Moses and Aaron; the Gedenkbuch, the two books containing the names and addresses of Jews deported from Berlin to the camps, and finally Walter Benjamin's One Way Street. Libeskind has made the process of the design central to his presentation of the work, but he never offers a logical, linear progression from these points to the finished design. They are allowed to remain fragmentary, part of the process, without being subsumed seamlessly into a totalised product. It is also clear from Libeskind's rhetoric that he seeks to align the project with Benjamin's philosophy, a connection that will become clearer as the chapter progresses.

According to the school of thought characterised by Gillian Rose as 'Holocaust Piety', the events of the Second World War marked the moment when the Enlightenment model of linear progressive time suddenly diverged into before and after, the presentiment and the memory of the absolute event.\textsuperscript{21} After Auschwitz, the direction of history reversed and became allegorical, such that every action following must be read through the veil of the catastrophe.\textsuperscript{22} If the Jewish

\textsuperscript{19} Libeskind, 'Between the Lines: The Jewish Museum, Berlin', Research in Phenomenology 22, 1992, pp. 82-87.
\textsuperscript{20} Libeskind, 'Between the Lines...', p. 83.
\textsuperscript{22} Michael Rothberg writes that Theodor Adorno is responsible for the wide use of 'after Auschwitz' both as an expression, and a conceptualisation of the Holocaust, exemplified in Auschwitz, as a violent break in historical time. This follows his famous, and widely misinterpreted, admonition that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Rothberg writes that '[a]s a two word sound-bite “after Auschwitz” has become the intellectual equivalent of the political poster slogan “Never Again!”'. For a summary of the uses and misuses of
Museum is a ‘delayed embrace of the victims by the culprits’, as it has been described in Germany, its political complexities stem from the residual presence of those culprits, in personal memory, official history, and the physical palimpsest of architecture. This is especially true in the city of Berlin, a primary example of the city as text, written and overwritten by successive waves of historical events. In this historically charged context, it would have been unacceptable for the Jewish Museum to resurrect any of the forms employed by National Socialism.

FOUR MOMENTS OF ANTI-CLASSICISM

Of the four major reasons for which Libeskind opposes the language of classicism with that of deconstruction, the first is simplest. At its most basic level, classicism is tainted by association; it bore the insignia of Nazi ideology, and has thus become an emblem of power itself. All architecture is conceived and exists in a political and ideological context, and classical architecture has been widely employed as an accepted monumental style by democratic as well as totalitarian political systems. The difference is that Nazi architecture was systematically engaged in intimidation, the exercise of power over individuals. It can not be simply depoliticised, and the difficulties facing Leon Krier in his attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of Speer as a mainstream Neo-Classical architect are manifold.

In Germany, and particularly in Berlin, Classicism as an architectural style has been irrevocably tainted through its appropriation by the Nazis. Even if Hitler had chosen some other style for the official buildings of the Reich, which is not...

Adorno’s statement, see Michael Rothberg, ‘After Adorno: Culture in the wake of catastrophe’, New German Critique, vol. 72, Fall 1997, p. 47.
23 Thomas Hoffmann, ‘Death is a Master from Germany’, Daidalos 38, December 1990, p. 103.
25 The 1981 debate between Krier and Joan Ockman in Oppositions was a clear polarisation of the positions of deconstruction and reconstruction, with Krier protesting the immanent destruction of two of the last remaining Nazi buildings in Berlin with the line that ‘architecture is not political, it is only an instrument of politics’ (p.37). Ockman responded with the accusation that Krier believed ‘one has but to remove the eagles and swastikas from Nazi buildings to make them pure again.’ (p. 40). For Krier on Speer, see Leon Krier, Albert Speer Architecture 1932-1942, Archives D’Architecture Moderne, Paris, 1978. For the Ockman/Krier debate, see Joan Ockman, 'The Most Interesting Form of Lie', Oppositions 24, Spring 1981, pp. 38-47, and Leon Krier, 'Vorwärts, Kamaraden, Wir Müssen Zurück (Forwards, Comrades, We Must Go Back)', Oppositions 24, Spring 1981, pp. 27-37.
impossible considering the eclecticism of the Nazi architectural program, it would still be inappropriate in a monument to the victims of a totalitarian regime. This is because it is a manifestation of the ideals of the classical, characterised by some theorists as striving towards total unity, completeness, and a timeless universality. Libeskind’s response in the Jewish Museum is to ‘ruin’ these totalising effects in a calculated strategy of transgression, of the classical tradition, the modern tradition, and especially of each of these as they may have led to, or been expressed in, the Nazi regime. While it would be naive to set up a straightforward dichotomy between classicism and deconstruction, the self conscious incoherence, fragmentation, and specific temporality of deconstruction comes as close as any architectural discourse to manifesting ‘the will to lose power’. Furthermore, in its emphasis on individual experience and subjectivity, it defeats the trademark Nazi conception of the populace as a ‘mass’.

The second reference or association of classicism is with Imperialism, the idea of the absolute rule of a single sovereign emperor, inherited from the Roman Empire. Hitler’s plans for the city of Berlin, the bureaucratic and administrative capital of the Third Reich, are illustrative of this. After the Nazi’s victory it was to be renamed ‘Germania’ and redesigned according to Speer’s megalomaniacal urban plan, with its North-South Axis, Reichschancellery, and Great Hall. Germania was to be the new capital and seat of government of the world, its dominance expressed and reinforced by the gigantic, stripped classicism of its architecture.

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27 The expression is taken from Anthony Vidler, who uses it to describe the work of those erstwhile deconstructivists Coop Himmelblau. The Architectural Uncanny, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 76.

28 The Nazis mastered the art of the public rally as spectacle, the unification of theatre, propaganda, and ritual. Speer’s ‘Cathedral of Light’ design for the 1934 Nazi party congress in Nuremberg was perhaps the most spectacular example, but the 1936 Olympic Games were equally a display of the populace as ‘mass ornament’. See Siegfried Kracauer, The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, ed. Thomas Levin, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 74-86.

The classical stream of Italian Fascist architects were attracted to the style for the same reasons, and like them Hitler saw the Thousand Year Reich as the natural continuation of the age of the Roman Emperors, and himself as the heir to the absolute power of Caesar and Augustus.30

The monumentality of this architecture served several functions. It was massive enough to endure into the future, or at least to appear capable of this, and I will return to Albert Speer's deliberately archaic use of materials and construction techniques to ensure that even in its eventual decay it would deteriorate into picturesque ruins. Such architecture thus fulfilled the simultaneous demands of political legitimation by association with the past, connection with the funereal origins of classical architecture, and subordination of the individual into the mass; 'Hitler and Speer were fascinated by monumental architecture - the architecture of death - because such architecture stresses the totality, the whole party, the whole people.'31 Classical architecture is always already monumental, not only because it is such a widely employed, even conventional, monumental style, but also because it refers to the ancient past while simultaneously aspiring to atemporality and eternal presence.

The notion that architectural monuments communicate temporality on a symbolic level is clear. What becomes more apparent in Nazi neo-classicism is the inherently totalitarian relationship this entails between the state and the ‘mass’. Any building that is anti-classical thus directs its opposition not simply to the stylistic attributes of classicism, but to its signification of an innate ‘monumentality’. Libeskind, and indeed all postwar architects were faced with the problem of refiguring monumentality itself after the abuses it suffered in the 'pseudomonumentality' of National Socialism.32 After the massive death and

30 On the use of classicism in Italian Fascist architecture, in a paper which emphasises the similarities in the universalising aims of classicism and modernism, see Giorgio Ciucci, 'Italian Architecture in the Fascist Period: Classicism between Neoclassicism and Rationalism: The many souls of the classical', Harvard Architecture Review 6, 1987, pp. 77-87.


32 The term is Siegfried Giedion's. See 'The Need for a New Monumentality', in Architecture you and me, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 28. See also his 'Nine Points on
destruction of the Second World War, the memorial aspect of monumentality, the creation of edifices dedicated to preserving memory, was more urgent than ever.

Libeskind's denial of monumental 'totality' is evidenced in the lack of a vantage point, anywhere in the Jewish Museum, which provides an overall or orientating view. On the ground the museum can never been understood as a whole, either from inside or out, and the 'zigzag plan', much touted in the architectural press, is not apparent to the visitor as a gestalt. The building is entered via an underground tunnel, an experience that exacerbates its disorientating lack of visual coherence. The 'line' running through the centre of the building, which would have been the logical spine of circulation, is in fact a deliberately empty space, a void accessible only from the ground floor, and overlooked by a series of bridges. Libeskind calls the project 'Between the Lines', and it is from the between the inextricably entangled lines of German and Jewish history that it speaks. By privileging the individual experience - albeit fragmented and schizophrenic - of each visitor, Libeskind achieves an 'antimonumental monumentality', where 'spatial monumentality is undercut by the inevitably temporal apprehension of the building.' This apparently tautological concept is possible because of the multiple meanings of 'monumentality', as a description for a particular architectural aesthetic, and a particular work of commemoration. In the Jewish Museum the memorial aspect of monumentality is preserved, but without a problematic reliance on aesthetic or symbolic transcendence, which tends, in pursuit of a harmonious totality, to marginalise the individuality of the subject.

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33 See the published discussion between Libeskind and Derrida which follows 'Behind the Lines' in *Research in Phenomenology* 22, 1992, p. 98.
34 Huyszen, 'The Voids of Berlin', p. 80.
35 John McCole discusses this in relation to the aesthetic symbol, a connection which will be further examined in the second section of the paper. McCole writes that 'the possibility of aesthetically transcending the flawed world of experience tends to devalue the experience of its brokenness. Such false aesthetic transcendence was just what Baroque Trauerspiel denied. In order to gain access to its allegorical form, therefore, Benjamin would have to demolish the affirmative biases built up around the romantic concept of the aesthetic symbol.' John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 127.
The Jewish museum clearly retains a memorial function, since the moral imperative of Holocaust historiography demands that it never be 'resolved', but kept present to each new generation. The fact that it is a museum, rather than a freestanding, monolithic commemorative object, suggests an active and meaningful engagement with history, rather than the traditional monument's passive contemplation. Of course, a Jewish museum in Berlin is faced with a particular dilemma, since the Nazis destroyed many of the objects of Jewish history, and much of the evidence of their own crimes. All that remains are 'small things, documents, archive materials, evocative of an absence rather than a presence.'

The Jewish museum is an empty museum, a monument to the present absence of Berlin's Jews. The void that is harboured at the spatial and metaphorical centre of the museum represents the tragic failure of the modern project, simultaneously as it memorialises its human victims. This space is therefore devoted quite specifically to absence; 'the museum proposal is to evoke and particularise an absence more than a presence: the unnameable of the voice of God, but also absence as an accusing form of presence of an incinerated culture and community, in whose cremation modernism was burned as well.' The representation of absence is a recurring theme in the theory and practice of deconstruction, but Libeskind's Jewish Museum is its most poetic, and at the same time most literal, manifestation.

The third association of classicism is a philosophical one, which was refracted through the Enlightenment and endured into modernity: the dream of Reason. Classical architecture was believed to literally 'embody' the ideals of classical reason, to celebrate the uniquely human capacity for rational thought. Hidden within this transcendent project, however, is the possibility of a dark apotheosis, and according to one stream of thought, the Western Enlightenment tradition, with its ultimate faith in progress via rational thought, was implicated not only in reinforcing an existing Nazi philosophy, but also in formulating it in the first

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36 Libeskind, 'Between the Lines...', p. 85.
place.39 The Holocaust could thus be seen as the apocalyptic culmination of the Western tradition, the negative corollary and counterpart of the Enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer, the most influential proponents of this position, frame it as the central dialectic of Enlightenment, and ‘conceive the process of Enlightenment itself as succumbing to a dialectical reversal into its opposite, a reversal that takes place behind the back of enlightened reflection.’40 In this conception Auschwitz represents the worst possible outcome of the classical tradition, with Nazism compounding its corruption of this tradition by exploiting one of its most noble products, classical architecture, to represent its own political program. Yet the universal order of classical architecture, its precision, proportion, and symmetry, always bore the seed of its applicability to totalitarian regimes, as an ideal model of the totalised worldview it proved irresistible not only to Hitler, but Mussolini and Stalin as well.

Finally, the fourth way in which the tradition of classicism was tainted in its appropriation by the Nazis was in the exemplarity of the ideal human body, man (and it was a man) as the centre of all things, manifested in architecture as an idealised and stylised anthropomorphism. The anthropomorphic tradition appears equally in the proportional perfection of Vitruvian man and the over-scaled gigantism of Nazi neo-classicism. The perfectibility of the body was also more deeply implicated in the formation of Nazi ideology, in the idea of racial purity, the perfectibility of an entire race through eugenics or selective breeding. From this basis it was an abhorrent but only small step to the Nazi imperative of ridding the Aryan race of impure blood, of whatever kind. Benjamin also finds a corollary

39Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe writes that ‘In the Auschwitz apocalypse, it was nothing less than the West, in its essence, that revealed itself - and continues, ever since, to reveal itself.’ Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art and Politics, translated Chris Turner, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 35.
40Rudiger Bubner, ‘The Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy’, in The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, ed Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, p. 155. Bubner continues: ‘The more enlightenment is convinced of itself and the correctness of what it does, the more it risks being dominated by the same irrational principle it struggles to supplant. Thus, in the end, reason’s omnipotence turns out to be just as irrational as nature’s despotism, against which all the first cultural revolutions were fought. In this way, the dialectic of enlightenment is made to atone for the Fall that, before all recorded time, drove humankind out of paradise and into history.’ (p. 156) The primary reference here is Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, translated John Cumming, Seabury Press, New York, 1972.
between the idealisation of the body and the historical concept of progress, understood as always being, at base, 'the progress of mankind itself', that is, 'something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectability of humankind.\textsuperscript{41}

The doctrine of the unbounded perfection of the ideal body is evident in Nazi architecture just as it is in the Olympian propaganda films of Leni Reifenstahl, or its final, fatal application in the extermination camps.

The Jewish Museum building embodies neither the perfect nor the grotesque human form.\textsuperscript{42} It shifts the anthropomorphic analogy from the embodiment of human form within built form to the realm of emotional affect, with the empathetic projection of psychological states from the building to the user. It reconstructs individual subjectivity through the 'tragic' experience of the building, provoking an emotional and psychological disturbance in the visitor, a disunity that mirrors the formal fragmentation of the architecture.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{41} Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 262.

\textsuperscript{42} Where deconstruction has adopted the anthropomorphic analogy, it has been a pointedly anti-humanist mutation, the representation of an inhuman body, in a distorted, dismembered, or mutilated state. Allusions to the human body are otherwise conspicuously absent from deconstruction, in its most extreme form it not only abolishes reference to human scale or proportion, but also effaces the presence of the human architect in the design process. Employing 'texts' from outside architecture, and using games, arbitrary processes and the vagaries of chance, this practice abandons the concept of 'design' as such. See Anthony Vidler, 'Architecture Dismembered' in The Architectural Uncanny, pp. 70-82, and David Goldblatt, 'The Dislocation of the Architectural Self', The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol. 49, no. 4, Fall 1991, pp. 337-348.

\textsuperscript{43} The tragic is 'that dramatic form that takes as its theme the ultimate destruction of the individual'. The experience of the Jewish museum is thus an experiential shadow of the tragic 'play' of history. Goldblatt, 'The Dislocation of the Architectural Self,' p. 341
THE AESTHETICS AND POETICS OF FRAGMENTATION

More than simply deriving a moral significance from the commemoration of the Holocaust, or using it to explicate a link between architecture and ethics, Libeskind reads its legacy as double-edged, an instrument of both destruction and redemption.

This double movement is captured in every level of the museum through the technique and aesthetics of fragmentation. Both Adorno and Benjamin wrote of the strategic value of the fragment as a means to deny totality, and Kurt Forster writes that ‘the idea of the fragment arises not from the gesture of salvaging a piece of the whole, but from disregard or even denial of the value represented by integral works.’ Libeskind’s fragmented building is made philosophically ‘accessible’ by freezing the detritus of the ‘ruined’ discourses of modernism, of history, and of the museum without attempting to reconstruct them into a new harmonious totality. In the words of Robin Evans, the ‘psychotic ambivalence of the technique … may either register a delight in smashing things up or sadness in displaying the shattered scene’, and I would contend that the elegiac and the celebratory are both present in the Jewish Museum.

In the Jewish Museum the memorial aspect of monumentality is preserved, but without a problematic reliance on aesthetic or symbolic transcendence, which tends to marginalise the individuality of the subject in pursuit of a harmonious totality. The building is thus able to function as a memorial precisely through its role as a museum, an institution that encourages engagement with history. It must be framed as an attempt to ‘ruin’ totalising effects in a calculated strategy of transgression, of the classical tradition, the modern tradition, and especially of each of these as they may have been expressed in the Nazi regime. I will argue that Libeskind enacts this subversion by employing the practical and metaphorical

46 John McCole discusses this in relation to the aesthetic symbol. McCole writes that ‘the possibility of aesthetically transcending the flawed world of experience tends to devalue the experience of its brokenness. Such false aesthetic transcendence was just what Baroque Trauerspiel denied. In order to gain access to its allegorical form, therefore, Benjamin would have to demolish the affirmative biases built up around the romantic concept of the aesthetic symbol.’ John McCole, Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, p. 127.
associations of the fragment and the ruin. The Jewish Museum can be read, in this conception, as a kind of constructed ruin, a deliberately 'ruined' monument.

But before returning to this idea later in the chapter, the theoretical implications of the ruin itself must first be examined more fully. The division between the classical and the anti-classical, demonstrated to have significant repercussions for architectural monumentality, will thus be pursued through the conceptualisations of the ruin advanced contemporaneously, but in very different guises, in the work of Speer and Walter Benjamin. The ideals of Nazi neo-classical architecture, as discussed above, can be seen to be manifest in Speer’s ‘Theory of Ruin Value’, where the aesthetic fragmentation he imagines in the future ruins of his buildings is belied by their continuing ideological totality. Conversely, in the context of Benjamin’s philosophy of history the ruin provides an emblem, not only of the melancholic worldview presented in Baroque tragic drama, but of allegory as a critical tool for historical materialism.47

PART TWO: SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY, ROMANTICISM AND DESTRUCTION IN THE RUIN

Given that the aestheticisation of politics and the manipulation of mythology for political gain are still frighteningly prevalent in the present day, and given also the increasing popularity of quasi-fascist ideologies throughout the world, there could hardly be a more pressing justification to re-visit Benjamin’s work here. Likewise, the complex interrelations between architecture and politics bear continuing analysis, and the culpability of architecture in representing totalitarian political regimes, as relevant today as it was in the 1930’s, requires constant vigilance. So this second section of the chapter sets out firstly to point out and analyse an historical curiosity: that Benjamin and Speer, two figures who could hardly be further separated on the political spectrum, employed the same emblem – the ruin – to illustrate their relative conceptions of tradition, history, and the place of the individual within them. Secondly, it will examine the significance of this use of the built environment as a metaphor for much broader political, aesthetic, and

47 Hal Foster has also noted a parallel between Benjamin and Speer’s use of the ruin motif, but he places it in a triad with the surrealist fascination with the ‘outmoded’. See Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, p.167.
philosophical questions. It will reiterate Benjamin’s warning, so timely and yet so tragically unheeded, of the dangers of allowing spectacle to infiltrate politics, and to disguise the workings of totalitarianism. Finally, it will open a speculation on architectural monumentality, and the possible relationship between ruin and monument. It might be assumed that the ruin represents the ‘other’ of the monument. The chapter will argue, however, that the ruin is not simply the remnant left over when monumentality has withered away, and that ruination does not necessarily entail a loss, but rather a shift in the meaning and monumentality of architecture.

Of course, it is only possible to juxtapose these two figures after first reiterating that much of Benjamin's critical thought, especially late in his life, was developed in direct opposition to the fascist ideology which Speer exemplifies. Speer’s role as official architect and later armaments minister for the Nazi party dictates that his interest in the ruin is as a vehicle for perpetuating the ideological nationalist romanticism of the party. The aim here is not to set up a dichotomy between Speer's concept of 'Ruin Value' and Benjamin's account of allegory in the ruin - even though this may be tempting in political terms - because this would be a simplification into binary opposition of a relationship which is considerably more complex. But this chapter will attempt to address the political schism between the two by subsuming Speer’s anecdotal ‘Theory of Ruin Value’ within the framework of Benjamin’s more sophisticated conception of the same motif. It will therefore read Speer through Benjamin, and take the 'law of ruins' as a glancing point of intersection.

THE AESTHETIC OF DESTRUCTION: SPEER’S ‘THEORY OF RUIN VALUE’

Ruins, and images of ruins, have held a moral, emotional, and aesthetic fascination throughout history. This is partly due to their ambiguous status as half building, half nature, but also their unique value as physical manifestations of the destructive effects of time, and thus as metaphoric representations of history itself. Throughout history, ruins as historical documents have consistently been balanced, and often

48 See for example The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics, ed. J.B. Jackson, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980.
eclipsed, by their affective emotional impact, their capacity to stir melancholy, eerie, or sublime moods.\textsuperscript{49} During the Baroque period, ruins came to be seen as a rich field of allegorical reference, and I will shortly return to Benjamin's interest in the concept of the ruin as an expression of the transience and frailty of human life. Later, during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the ruin reached its romantic apotheosis in the aesthetic of the picturesque. Whether real ruins or fake, or fakes assembled of real archaeological fragments, ruins appeared in the picturesque as a compositional element in the constructed landscapes of both heroic painting and garden design. Dilapidation and decay became the subjects of legitimate aesthetic appreciation. Speer's \textit{Theory of Ruin Value} is thus an adaptation of a long tradition of aesthetic appreciation of dilapidation, a tradition that also includes the work of Alois Riegl, to which I will return. For my purposes here the principal interest of Speer's work lies not in any intellectual acuity, but rather the insight it provides into the value of ruins to the Nazi self-presentation.

Speer first developed his 'Theory of Ruin Value' in 1934, and described its formation in the memoirs published later as \textit{Inside the Third Reich}.\textsuperscript{50} After discussing Hitler's belief in the role of Nazi architecture, to 'transmit his time and spirit to posterity', Speer begins,

\begin{quote}
The building of the Zeppelin Field was begun at once, in order to have at least the platform ready for the coming Party Rally. To clear ground for it, the Nuremberg streetcar depot had to be removed. I passed by its remains after it had been blown up. The iron reinforcements protruded from concrete debris and had already begun to rust. One could easily visualise their further decay. This dreary sight led me to some thoughts I later propounded to Hitler under the pretentious heading of 'A Theory of Ruin Value'. The idea was that buildings of modern construction were not suited to form that "bridge of tradition" to future generations that Hitler was calling for. It was hard to imagine that rusting heaps of rubble could communicate these heroic inspirations which Hitler admired in the monuments of the past. My "theory" was intended to deal with the dilemma. By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{49} For an excellent analysis of the conspicuous absence of the ruin from Kant's writings on aesthetic affect and the sublime, see Karen Lang, 'The Dialectics of Decay: Rereading the Kantian Subject', \textit{The Art Bulletin}, vol. 79, September 1997, pp. 413-39;

were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models.\textsuperscript{51}

Speer goes on to describe how he presented the 'Theory' to Hitler in the form of a 'romantic drawing' of the Zeppelin Field as it might look as a ruin, 'overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still clearly recognisable.' Remarking that many of Hitler's retinue found the drawing blasphemous, Speer finishes his account with Hitler's affirmation, the order that 'in the future the important buildings of the Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principles of this "law of ruins"'.\textsuperscript{62}

It is clear from the beginning that for Speer the most offensive aspect of the demolished remains of the streetcar depot is not the concrete rubble itself, but the steel reinforcing rods that protrude from it. His objection is plain; the ruins are too much of the moment, their rusting steel situates them in a specific, modern, period, and precludes the equal effects of timelessness and excessive age that the classical ruin demands. By describing the rubble as ‘dreary’, Speer immediately positions it in the realm of aesthetic affect. He doesn't say that the rubble is 'ugly', which would imply that it is an object of abstract aesthetic judgement, but that it intrudes into the psychological realm. In other words, he finds the ruins not only ugly, but depressingly ugly. This negative affect originates in the demolition's uncovering of modern construction materials and techniques, and is compounded by the fact that the steel is rusting, decaying in a way unique to itself, that is, an equally modern form of decay. The rubble is precisely dated by the modes of construction revealed in its destruction.

Furthermore, Speer's dismay seems to spring as much from the fact that he can 'easily visualise [the steel's] further decay' as from the material itself.\textsuperscript{53} Steel's accelerated rate of deterioration serves even further to situate the ruins in the now, in the short and 'artificial' cycle of violent destruction and rapid degeneration characteristic of modern materials. It is clear from Speer's illustration of the projected ruin of the Zeppelin Field that his ideal ruin is a classical type, on a long cycle of growth and decay attuned to the cycles of nature. The instantaneity

\textsuperscript{51} Speer, \textit{Inside the Third Reich}, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{52} Speer, \textit{Inside the Third Reich}, pp. 97-98.
\textsuperscript{53} Speer, \textit{Inside the Third Reich}, p. 97, emphasis added.
and violence of the ‘artificial’ ruin, demolished by explosives, stands in contrast to the ‘natural’ ruin of Speer’s vision. By representing the future ruins of the Zeppelin field as having merged with nature, weathered gently by the effects of wind and weather over a long period, he places his ruins on the scale of geological time, rather than the ever more rapid rate of change in human history, continually accelerating in response to new technology.

The new aesthetics of technological innovation, revealed in the exposed reinforcing rods, provides a point of departure for my argument here. Specifically, this is the aspect of the ruins that Speer finds most distasteful, but which Benjamin would have found most fascinating. A new aesthetic, or more pointedly a subversion of aesthetics, is unveiled by the arbitrary processes of decay. In this dialectical image is also revealed the new ways of seeing produced by new technologies and materials. For Benjamin, it is through such violence that the present can be revealed to itself.

Speer's concern is not for a specific and fleeting 'now', but for atemporality. The sudden presence of the present, glimpsed in the rusting reinforcing rods, is for him an unwelcome excision and framing of a moment from within a temporal continuum. Speer thus unwittingly reveals a truth crucial also to Benjamin - the temporality of a ruin is produced not only by the means of its destruction, but its original construction as well. Speer’s use of archaic methods and materials in constructing the Zeppelin Field attempts to ensure a ‘natural’ ruin by building a certain mode of destruction into the construction itself. Steeped in the romantic tradition that Benjamin specifically opposed, Speer can only see the ruins of the modern as ugly and out of place, or rather, out of time. Without an aesthetic patina


55 The irony of the situation is that Speer’s elaborate preparations provided no guarantee, and in reality the majority of his works were destroyed violently by enemy bombs or by demolition after the war, creating an aesthetic effect quite different to that which he had planned. Indeed it has been noted that, in many cases, these concrete and steel ruins provide the only appropriate memorial for the Nazi’s appalling actions. At the Auschwitz concentration camp, where other buildings have been left standing but the crematoriums were judged too awful to remain, the pile of rubble left over is both more mundane and more appropriate than the actual Holocaust memorials constructed later. See Heathcote, Monument Builders, pp. 64-71.
built up over time, which can be bent to the expression of mythological history, Speer’s dreary rubble presents the eclipse of romantic aesthetics by the true appearance of historical acts. This is precisely the immanence of historical and aesthetic truth in a single (dialectical) image that Benjamin would have recognised, and I will now turn to an examination of why this is so.

THE AESTHETIC AS DESTRUCTION: BENJAMIN’S THEORY OF BAROQUE ALLEGORY

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin elucidates a theory of Baroque allegory in which the ruin, as the physical corollary and counterpart of allegory, takes a central role; ‘[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things’, he writes. Benjamin describes allegory as a form that has been progressively marginalised by the hegemony of beauty within aesthetics, an ascendancy exemplified in the aesthetic symbol. Benjamin draws a sharp distinction between symbol and allegory, and suggests that romantic symbolism, itself a corruption of ‘real’ mystical and sacred symbolism, usurped the legitimate position of allegory within the Baroque period. His goal was to revitalise allegory, to ‘redeem’ it, and thus redress criticisms that it was too mechanical, a mere ‘technique’, based on convention, suitable for illustrating ‘concepts’ but not ‘ideas’. Allegory had also been condemned as ultimately meaningless because of its

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57 See McCole, who writes that ‘the possibility of aesthetically transcending the flawed world of experience tends to devalue the experience of its brokenness. Such false aesthetic transcendence was just what Baroque Trauerspiel denied. In order to gain access to its allegorical form, therefore, Benjamin would have to demolish the affirmative biases built up around the romantic concept of the aesthetic symbol.’ John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993, p. 127.
59 This is Schopenhauer’s distinction, which Benjamin employed to illustrate the historical marginalisation of allegory. As McCole relates it, ‘the clincher in this argument was to equate allegory with script, for script was seen as "a conventional relationship between a signifying image and its meaning...a mere mode of designation", or "a playful illustrative technique at best" [which designated] The "art of the symbol" versus the mere "technique of allegory"'. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 123.
‘failure to stabilise meaning’, its sheer proliferation of readings in which any object was eventually capable of signifying any meaning. But Benjamin’s resurrection of allegory, and his insistence that it exceeds symbolism by exceeding aesthetics, unlocks its potential as a critical or ‘destructive’ strategy. Allegory is a sensibility as well as a method; ‘Benjamin’s phrasing repeatedly stresses that allegory is a focal point from which to look on things: he refers to “the allegorical way of seeing” or of “looking at things”: “the allegorical attitude”; “the allegorical intention” as well as allegorical intuition.’ In this conception, allegory is able to defeat beauty by going ‘beyond’ it, and breaking out into the phenomenal, historical world.

Benjamin’s condemnation of the symbol is enacted around the issue of beauty as a totality, he distrusts the aesthetic symbol’s presentation of a falsely affirmative, mythifying image of an ideal. The symbol aspires to aesthetic autonomy, completion, and transcendental unity, and it has been wrapped in a harmonious trinity with truth, beauty, and moral good since the time of Aristotle; ‘as it invokes totality and closure, classical symbolism seeks to transcend time and history, thereby displacing the anguish of life with images of stabilised harmony and eternal perfection.’ In contrast, Benjamin sees the allegorical sensibility as a means to defeat the totalising aims of symbolism; with its emphasis on transience, specificity, and the contingent world of lived experience, allegory provides a means

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60 McCole, Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, p. 135. Later re-interpretations of allegory have valued precisely this richness, indeterminacy and ambiguity of meaning, the disengagement of a direct connection between signifier and signified.

61 The destructive or violent aspect of Benjamin’s concept of allegory is most apparent in his later discussion of it's use in Baudelaire. Buck-Morss quotes Benjamin: “The destructive impulse of Baudelaire is nowhere interested in getting rid of that which declines. That comes to expression in allegory, and it is this which constitutes its regressive tendency. On the other hand, however, precisely in its destructive fervour, allegory is concerned with the banishment of the illusory appearance that proceeds out of every “given order”, be it of art or of life, as if from the transfiguring order of the totality or the organic, making it appear bearable. And that is the progressive tendency of allegory.” Walter Benjamin, Konvolut V, ‘Conspiracies’, p. 417, quoted in Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, pp. 197-201.


63 ‘In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty.’ Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 178.

to represent the frailty and finitude of human life. The tragic fate of the individual adrift in history finds allegorical expression in the emblem of the death’s head, through which Baroque allegorists expressed the ultimate vanity and futility of human aspirations, forever grounded by the knowledge of the inevitability of death.

In allegory the *facies hippocratica* of history lies before the eyes of the observer as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history which, from the beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful expresses itself in a countenance - no, in a death’s head ... in this, the figure of man's most extreme subjection to nature, is pronounced the enigmatic question not only of the nature of human existence as such but of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the core of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular account of history as the passion of the world, a world that is meaningful only in the stations of its decay. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical being and significance.  

The individual, in the 'primordial landscape' of the ruin, is faced with an image of his or her own death, that 'most extreme subjection to nature'. The futility of the individual human life is compounded into the 'enigmatic question' of the meaning and value of all human endeavour in all of history. The baroque view of life, as a play performed within the ever-present shadow of the death's head, takes its significance precisely from this transience. Opposing the false transcendence of the romantic symbol, in baroque allegory 'it is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history'.

If the death’s head represents the eventual fate of all living things, the ruin provides an equivalent in the inorganic realm; a reminder that not only architecture, but all cultural and social aspirations must eventually succumb. The ruin represents brokenness and transience, bearing as it does the physical traces of time on its surface as a kind of historical palimpsest or script; ‘The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience... In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. The ruin frequently provided a background for Baroque tragic drama and allegorical painting, compounding its message by presenting the death’s head - the ruins of the corporeal human individual - within

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65 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.
the ruins of its cultural and architectural ‘achievements’. If even the most enduring of human creations, built in stone, were destined for inevitable decay, then the frailty of human flesh was thus revealed to be doubly condemned.

The distinction between the false affirmation of symbolism and the destructive power of allegory is perhaps most clearly marked in the ‘decisive category of time’. In John McCole’s paraphrase, ‘the symbol embodies “momentary totality”, “self-contained, concentrated, steadfastly remaining itself”, whereas allegory has the discontinuous structure of a series of moments, of transitory, failed attempts to capture meaning.’ Similarly, Buck-Morss notes that ‘In allegory, history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation; but time enters the symbol as an instantaneous present – “the mystical Nu” – in which the empirical and the transcendent appear momentarily fused within a fleeting, natural form.’ Thus while the symbol manifests the fleeting representation of eternity, allegory’s emphasis on specificity and fragmentation in the objective world is extended to the temporal, where time is shattered into eternally passing instants of historical insight through ‘shock’.

TEMPORALITY, TRADITION, AND SHOCK

The notion of the isolated image ‘blasted out of the continuum of history’ reoccurs throughout Benjamin’s philosophy of history, reflecting a central tenet of historical materialism, that the past is constructed by the present, and must therefore be read in and through that present. Different interpretations of history would thus result from changing modes of perception brought about by the effects of new technology. Speer’s Law of Ruins is predicated on exactly the opposite premise - since his ruins are designed to ‘inspire’ subjects a thousand years in the future with the same aesthetic affect he admires in the present, they are predicated on the

68 McCole, Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, p. 133.
70 ‘A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the “eternal” image of he past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.’ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1968, p. 264
belief that the citizens of the future will be no different from those of his own time. Tradition, for him, is based on conservation, on the perpetuation of an unchanging ideal. Benjamin’s understanding of historical subjectivity departs radically from Speer’s positivist, teleological view of history as continuous progress: the ‘allegorical mode’ allows him to express ‘the experience of a world in fragments in which the passing of time means not progress but disintegration.’\(^7\) For the historical materialist, the sudden, shocking presence of the present provides a vital anchor point in the fluidity and indeterminacy of historical interpretation, and it is achieved through the act of plucking an image or object out of history’s stream and examining it ‘at a standstill’, as a dialectical image.\(^7\) Dialectical images are themselves allegorical, a ‘modern form of emblematics’, in which the past and the present exist simultaneously, their juxtaposition providing a critical tension.\(^7\)

Speer’s ‘Theory of Ruin Value’ is designed to avoid such affirmations of a specific time, place, or individual in favour of a generalised and nostalgic temporality. These are precisely the ‘traces of the present’ Benjamin refers to in his characterisation of the ‘Destructive Character’, for whom ‘destroying rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age; it cheers because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed eradication, of his own condition.’\(^7\) For Benjamin destruction is never an end in itself, it is only ever a process required to free history from accretions of tradition and mythology. It is the fragmentary rubble left in the aftermath of destruction that manifests the present and provides a field of possibilities to the allegorist. The destructive character, conversely, ‘obliterates even the traces of destruction’.\(^7\) The rubble of the demolished streetcar depot here provides a basis for a distinction, since Speer’s negative reaction is based precisely on the appearance of these ‘traces of destruction’. For Benjamin, however, it is only through an examination of these

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\(^7\) Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 18.

\(^7\) ‘The presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present, which produces political electricity in a “lightning flash” of truth, is the “dialectical image”…it is “dialectics at a standstill.”’ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 219.

\(^7\) Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 170.

\(^7\) Benjamin, ‘The Destructive Character’, *Reflections*, 301.

\(^7\) Benjamin, The Destructive Character, *Reflections*, 302.
melancholy traces, the rubble left after the ‘catastrophes’ of history, that the allegorist can critically approach ‘his own condition’.

COUNTERING THE AESTHETICISATION OF POLITICS

Benjamin’s understanding of allegory as a critical strategy, a means of undermining or corrupting established traditions from within, lends it a crucial significance both to his philosophy of history and his critique of the aestheticisation of politics. Both can, in turn, be analysed in opposition to Speer’s theory of ruin value, which manifests precisely the mythologised, nostalgic view of history and propagandist application of aesthetics that Benjamin derided. If Benjamin’s understanding of the ruin as an emblem of transience is allegorical, Speer’s employment of the ruin is ‘symbolic’ in that it aspires to the idealised, atemporal totality characteristic of Nazi Neo-Classical architecture. Allegory, for Benjamin, is not only counteraesthetic, but a counter to aesthetics, and therein lies its particular strength in opposition to the ‘aestheticisation of politics’ he identified as a key characteristic of fascism.

In the epilogue to ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin identifies an apotheosis of the aestheticisation of politics in Marinetti’s ecstatic vision of the beauty of war. Such an ‘aestheticisation’ was equally present in every aspect of civic life under the Nazi regime, and can be seen as an important device by which the populace was subduced into a homogenous and compliant ‘mass’. Lutz Koepnick writes that, in Benjamin’s formulation, ‘fascism displaced politics with aesthetics, not only to dedifferentiate the institutional complexity of modern societies, but also to transform the political into a vessel of religious revelation and community building’. Koepnick goes on to list three distinct methods by which, according to Benjamin, fascism employed aesthetics for political

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gain, and juxtaposes them against Benjamin’s ‘answer’ to the tendency, which lay in politically engaged art - specifically montage, and its use in Russian avant-garde film.  

Benjamin identified symbolism as the medium of mythologised political representation, and allegory as its counter impulse, and this is the general theoretical trajectory of both the ‘Work of Art’ essay and the political aspects of The Origin of German Tragic Drama. The opposition is elucidated through a reverse relationship with myth; if ‘allegory and myth were “antithetical”… [i]ndeed, allegory was an “antidote” to myth’,  

this was countered by symbolism, which ‘ultimately becomes complicit with myth because it hides the methods of signification upon which it is based.’  

Allegory is thus equally as ‘political’ as symbolism, but its energy is of a de-mythifying, anti-aesthetic type. Benjamin and Speer each manage to read the ruin in terms of his own political program, which is to say they read diametrically opposed concepts into the same motif. Where Benjamin saw transience and decay, Speer saw permanence and continuation. The point here is that in all terms, including the history of the idea, Benjamin was right and Speer was wrong.

In the context of Benjamin’s melancholic conception of the ruin, it is understandable that many of Speer’s contemporaries in the Nazi party saw his Law of Ruins as an entirely inappropriate image for the party to project. Speer of course saw no such intimation of transience and futility, precisely because his understanding of the ruin is confined to the aesthetic realm. The ruin appears to have lost its totality and descended into fragmentation, but this is a deceptive appearance, since its political program remains intact, and as totalitarian as ever. It

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79 ‘First, he maintained that political spectacles divert critical judgements about the configurations of modern life; they deflect any comprehension of the political as a nonmetaphysical space in which we may negotiate the cultural ideas, institutions, and values that ought to organise political exchange. Second, Benjamin read fascism as an attempt to superimpose on political practices romantic notions of genius expressivity, and hence, to ground processes of legitimation in aesthetic myths of self-referential creativity and symbolic totality. Third, Benjamin believed that the aestheticisation of politics results in a deluding regime of visual modes of political representation, one that mesmerises the masses and tranfixes them as uncritical spectators and voiceless tokens in the allegedly aesthetic form of the Volksgemeinschaft.’ Koepnick, ‘Allegory and Power’ p. 59

80 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, p. 164

is not a process of disintegration or reduction, but of accretion; Speer's ruin becomes ever more 'whole' as it gathers the aesthetic layering of dilapidation. Far from relinquishing control of his buildings to allow their return to nature, Speer proposes to use the ruin to manipulate time and decay for aesthetic affect. Just as Nazi state architecture relied on domination to subordinate the will of its subjects, Speer’s ideal ruins project a sense, not of the individual’s significance through transience, but the absolute irrelevance of a single human life in the context of the timeless and monolithic state apparatus.

The ultimately affirmative message of Speer’s ‘Theory of Ruin Value’ is that even though the individual must die and be forgotten, this is of no consequence since the body politic will ‘live on’ eternally. This further encourages identification with the ‘Fatherland’ since it provides a means of achieving immortality. Thus the practice common to SS officers, of wearing a death’s head emblem sewn into the uniform, emerges as an symbol, not only of willingness to die in the name of the Reich, but of this willingness actually re-constituting the individual as already dead.\textsuperscript{82} The constant presence of the death’s head is equally a means for the individual soldier to become accustomed to living with (or rather \textit{in}) death, for signifying to the enemy that he has nothing to lose, and for binding him to his comrades in the collective. Such an everyday familiarity with death stands in marked contrast to Benjamin's understanding of the death’s head as a revival of \textit{vanitas}, an emblem directed to the individual, and designed to be happened upon unexpectedly, providing a sudden jolting reminder of personal vanity in the face of human mortality. The soldier, as a pure instrument of the state, voluntarily renounces subjectivity, and transfers individual mortality itself into the perpetuation of the regime as a whole.

Nazi architecture, whether complete or in ruins, was likewise intended to efface the temporal presence of the individual, subsuming it into a generalised mythologised ‘timelessness’. In opposition to this, ‘Benjamin’s revaluation of allegory … coincides with the attempt to redeem the individual body from what might be understood as an aesthetic desubstantiation of existence, the unbearable

\textsuperscript{82} The use of the skull and cross bones flag by pirates in the Baroque period carried a similar connotation - having chosen to live as renegades, pirates were condemned to die if they should ever be captured, and thus lived (literally) under the sign of their renounced mortality.
lightness of being under the aegis of the aesthetics of power.\textsuperscript{83} This could be the logical conclusion of Nazi anthropomorphism - beginning with heroic sculpture and overscaled architectural orders, extending to a glorification of Olympian athletes, and expanding fatally into the purification of the Aryan race through eugenics and extermination, it finds its culmination in the subversion of death through individual identification with the eternal body of the state. Such an identification was constantly reinforced through the spectacle and visuality of the Nazi regime - precisely the ‘aestheticisation’ that Benjamin condemned - and found its spatial equivalent in the Nazi party rallies.\textsuperscript{84} The bounded human life was thus submerged in an unbroken temporal continuum.

**MONUMENTALITY AND TOTALITY: ALOIS RIEGL AND THE ‘INTENTIONAL’ MONUMENT**

The version of temporality projected by Speer’s idealised ruin bears significant commonalities with that of Alois Reigl’s description of the ‘intentional monument’ in his seminal essay, ‘The Modern Cult of Monuments’.\textsuperscript{85} The intentional monument has historically been the most common type, distinguished by Reigl from the ‘unintentional’ or historical monument, and art or architectural objects with the aesthetic quality of ‘age-value’. Reigl divides these categories loosely into monuments of art and monuments of history, and his characterisation bears directly upon the present argument in that these two qualities are never mutually exclusive. Reigl writes that ‘it is important to realise that every work of art is at once and without exception a historical monument because it represents a specific stage in the development of the visual arts... Conversely, every historical monument is also an art monument... It follows that the differentiation of “artistic” and “historical” monuments because the latter at once contains and suspends the former.’\textsuperscript{86} In

\textsuperscript{83} Koepnick, ‘Allegory and Power’ pp. 65-66

\textsuperscript{84} ‘Badges, uniforms, the optics of power, at once organise, control, and entertain the social body; they assign to the individual a fixed place in the political hierarchy and simultaneously satisfy his aesthetic demands, his scopophilic desires.’ Koepnick, ‘Allegory and Power’ p. 63.


\textsuperscript{86} Reigl, ‘The Modern Cult of Monuments.’, p. 22.
monumentality, then, the boundaries between the two realms are not clearly defined, and the implications of this are significant. The ways in which Reigl’s categories are blurred by Speer and Benjamin’s concepts of the ruin also illuminates Libeskind’s museum’s anti-monumental monumentality, engaged as it is in deliberately commemorating an event, but only by subverting the traditionally monolithic aesthetic of intentional monuments.

In Reigl’s description, the ruin would usually be classified as an unintentional monument, since it is commonly brought about by an uncontrolled or ‘unintentional’ process, and stands generally for historical development, with its cycles of human construction eventually overtaken by nature. It does not commemorate specific events in the past, except through association on the part of individual subjects. This is also the frame within which Benjamin sees the ruin, as an object that stands generally, but not necessarily intentionally, for death, and the transience and futility of human life. On one level every monument is a gravestone; alongside its more acknowledged representation of commemoration and remembrance, it marks not only the inevitability of death, but also of forgetting. It is in this context that Robert Musil wrote that ‘there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument’, and the intentional monument is an admonition addressed specifically to the subjects of the future, exhorting them not to forget, but predicated on the assumption that they will. If the work of remembering was completed diligently and kept alive in living memory there would be no need for a massive and enduring object to act as redress and reminder, to point to the absence of events past and people dead.

The intentional monument thus addresses itself, paradoxically, to the precise moment when the event or person it commemorates is forgotten, and disappears entirely from living memory to remain only as an inscription in stone. It is here that Speer’s deft manipulation of aesthetics to produce the false appearance of historical truth through ‘age-value’ is enacted. Even though he intends for the ruins of his buildings to inspire the ‘heroic inspirations’ needed to

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resurrect the Reich on a fourth occasion, this is nowhere made explicit in the ruins themselves. Their propagandist aspect is disguised under the apparently accidental, and thus ‘truthful’ sign of the historical monument, through the aesthetic patina of authenticity produced by age value. Speer’s monumental ruins are not addressed to the citizens of the Third Reich, but erected as a buttress against being forgotten when these citizens no longer exist. At that time in the distant future Speer plans to communicate through aesthetic affect, exploiting the accumulated age-value of his ruins; it is therefore not surprising that he is dismayed by the ‘dreariness’ of the demolished streetcar depot, which is devoid of age value and therefore does not produce the desired affect. The interesting aspect of Benjamin’s conception, in this context, is that he gives no precedence to ‘age value’ as an aesthetic, but only as a bearer of traces of the past. For him the romanticism of the ruin is not a prompt for historical truth, but rather a means of obscuring it.

For Speer the ruin represents, not the end of the signifying aspect of architecture, but its continuation in a different vessel. ‘Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, …Our architectural works should also speak to the conscience of a future Germany centuries from now.’ Nostalgia and a nationalistic preservation of tradition were central to the aims of Nazi propaganda. Much of the party’s authority was built upon a mythological genealogy stretching back to Imperial Rome, and its architectural aspirations centred on perpetuating this ‘tradition’ well into the future. Speer’s ruin was thus conceived as the point of origin for the regeneration of a monumentality in which the thread of continuity supposedly reaching from classical antiquity to the Third Reich would be preserved. The Thousand-Year Reich, in this conception, could regenerate and extend indefinitely. And here again the politics of the aesthetic arise - an intentional monument is a deliberate or artificial prompt for memory, but the ruin, as a reminder of the inevitability of decay, is rarely considered an appropriate vehicle for perpetuating memory.

88 Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, pp. 96-97
The ruin is by definition an unintentional monument. The commemorative function of a ruin is thus usually incidental, or accidental, and subjective. This is matched by the sources of its aesthetic pleasurability - the ‘organic’ asymmetry, rough edges, and irregularity produced by the arbitrary effects of nature are enjoyable because ‘the original intention of the builder has been more or less lost’. By employing the ruin as a historical monument, to carry specific messages into the future, Speer attempts to disguise his political motives under the ‘disinterested’ sign of nature. Even though he intends for the ruins of his buildings to inspire the ‘heroic inspirations’ needed to resurrect the Fourth Reich, this is nowhere made explicit in the ruins themselves. Their propagandist aspect is hidden under the sign of the historical monument, through the aesthetic and the authenticity produced by age value.

Speer’s attempts to create ‘natural’ ruins bear superficial similarities to Benjamin’s conception of the ruin as ‘history... physically merged with the setting’. But when Benjamin writes of history becoming nature, he intends this as a reflection of the baroque view of nature, not seen ‘in bud and bloom, but in the overripeness and decay of her creations’. Speer’s romantic illustration, on the other hand, is a picturesque vision of architecture merged ambiguously with nature, overgrown with ivy, its edges blurred and softened by the effects of ‘natural’ weathering and decay. For Speer the blurring of boundaries between architecture, nature, and history is read as an affirmation of progress, of nature as an adjunct of fate, as though the Nazi party had come ‘naturally’ to power and would just as ‘naturally’ return to it in the future. The ruin in this vision is an expression, not only of National Socialism as a ‘force of nature’, but also of the inevitable renewal of that force, where the ruin operates as a symbol of lasting tradition and eternal return. Conversely, for Benjamin, as for the allegorists of Baroque tragic drama, ‘the word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of

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90 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, pp. 177-178.
91 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 179.
transience...in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of eternal decay.  

THE RUIN AS PROCESS AND TRACE OF ‘POVERTY’

If Speer’s attitude towards tradition is one of preservation and continuity, hence the idea that people in a thousand years will be the same as those in the present, Benjamin’s position is far more ambivalent. For him any evocation of tradition is equally a traduction, an act of violence against that tradition brought about by the inevitability of speaking it falsely. This notion is illuminated by Benjamin’s distinction between ‘Erfahrung’ and ‘Erlebnis’, each of which is rendered in English as ‘experience’. If Erfahrung can be described as experience in the past tense, the weight of received ideas, habit and custom that is built up over years, then it is this accretion of tradition that Benjamin sees as being incompatible or in tension, in the modern period, with Erlebnis, the present tense or ‘now’ of lived experience. Erfahrung, when read as a stultifying force, must be shrugged off before modern society can ‘wake’ into the true experience of the present. As Detlef Mertins states it, ‘the erasure of “experience” (Erfahrung) as something passed on had become necessary for the possibility of “experience” (Erlebnis) as something lived - the elimination of history for the openness of historicity’. Benjamin understood the value of past experience as a means to inform the present, but saw the danger in tradition when it was misappropriated by fascist groups and reworked into mythology. Benjamin’s project of ‘positive barbarism’ was engaged in demolishing these mythological aspects of tradition in order to release history from its bondage, and he describes the state of living under such ‘erasure’ as one of ‘poverty’.

The concept of poverty works as a description of the liberated condition of the subject following the action of positive violence, which is also the emancipatory potential of the ruin. In this sense, the ruin and the glass house both have the same

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92 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, pp. 177-178.
effect on the subject, both are ‘ruined’ by being stripped of all affirmative symbolism. For Benjamin, violence and destruction are able to 'shatter the continuum of history', leaving in their wake a fresh and de-mythified field of fragments and detritus. The act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination, making it 'accessible'. For Benjamin, it is through the suddenness and shock of destruction that the subject emerges from the 'dream' of tradition and into modern life in the present. The stripping away of the 'traces' of tradition, the removal of 'aura', the sudden shock of awakening, all result, in Benjamin's conception, in the emancipated state of the 'new poverty', where illusions are abandoned and the subject is presented to itself in the present.

This is the true meaning, then, of Benjamin’s statement that '[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things': Criticism in the name of allegory is a process of conceptually 'ruining' the structures of affirmative argument and then of working through the rubble. Criticism as an activity of stripping its objects bare, mortifying them, dragging the truth content of what is depicted in the image out before it, is analogous to the physical forces of decay and destruction. The 'attraction' of ephemeral beauty is worn away, revealing the essential structure, whether of object or idea, and leaving it as a ruin. Benjamin's conception of the ruin is as a means of laying bare a truth buried beneath layers of false romantic aesthetics. Ruin, both as verb and noun, process and object, thus exemplifies a mode of working and a field of possibilities for historical materialism. It provides the basis for further examination of the interrelations between aesthetics

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95 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 177-78.

96 Criticism itself is thus a 'violent' act: 'Regardless of medium, [Benjamin] considered criticism an activity of stripping its objects bare, mortifying them, dragging the truth content of what is depicted in the image out before it, not as ‘an unveiling that destroys the mystery but a revelation that does it justice. Thus the negativity and destructiveness of criticism opens up a moment of revelation, which in turn opens the future potentiality of the object.' Detlef Mertins, 'Walter Benjamin's Glimpses of the Unconscious: New Architecture and New Optics', History of Photography 22, no. 2, Summer 1998, p. 119

97 'The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is as follows: to make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth. The transformation of material content into truth content makes the decrease in effectiveness, whereby the attraction of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, into the basis for a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is stripped off, and the work stands as a ruin.' Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 182.
and politics, allegory and symbol, monument and ruin, criticism and myth. The chapter will now turn to this task by returning to the architecture of the Jewish Museum.

PART THREE: THE MUSEUM ‘AFTER AUSCHWITZ’

The architecture of the Jewish Museum works in both museological and architectural terms to foreground its own position in the wake of catastrophe - the work of destruction has already occurred, and what remains is mourning, the expression of brokenness, and the gathering of the detritus. To speak of the Holocaust as a metahistorical event is not to say it lies outside history, on the contrary, one of the tenets of Holocaust historiography is the rigorous historicising of the event, including the interrogation of pre-Auschwitz history for precursors. It must be conceived as neither a freak historical accident nor a random outbreak of pure evil, since both of these approaches excerpt it from its historical and political context and thus exonerate the conditions that allowed it to occur. Such a historicisation of the very event that supposedly 'shatters' history itself also threatens to shatter the museum institution, one of the primary vehicles of historiography. Jean-François Lyotard has compared the Holocaust to an earthquake, which 'destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects, but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes, directly and indirectly'. For him, the apparatus of recording history was not simply struck into silence but actively destroyed by the magnitude of an event that exceeded the scale of all previous human actions. Equally, if it is true that Hitler 'ruined' everything he touched, then not only classical architecture but all architecture after Auschwitz is, metaphorically, 'in ruins'. Theodor Adorno's famous pronouncement that 'to write poetry after


99 The idea that Hitler spoiled everything he touched gave rise to the now famous comment made in frustration by Hans Hollein in 1978; 'Fortunately Hitler didn't have too pronounced a taste for Wienschnitzel; otherwise they too would be forbidden in Germany today.'
Auschwitz is barbaric, defined 'after Auschwitz' as a new temporal state in which every cultural discourse should have been somehow transformed.

Adorno’s statement has been widely interpreted as a definition of the limits of representation, and a questioning of whether the 'humanities', including architecture, would or should still be possible in light of the death of humanism. Since architecture has in fact endured, it must accept its compromised post-Auschwitz position, and continue in the knowledge of its own 'barbarity'. The museum institution is also engaged in the re-presentation of history, and inevitably reveals its underlying philosophical model of history. In the Jewish Museum, this is manifest as a critical standpoint on the traditional museum apparatus, since much post-Holocaust historiography has been engaged with discrediting the linear progressive model of history the museum traditionally enshrined.

As the institution engaged in constructing and disseminating an official representation of history, the traditional museum was predicated on the incremental advance of civilisation through technological, scientific, and cultural evolution. Such a Utopian faith in the power of progress is irrevocably compromised in a museum dealing with Holocaust history. Rather than carrying the West forward to an ever more sophisticated civilisation, such teleological thought brought it to its lowest ebb. Any museum, and equally any building, engaged in commemorating the Holocaust must therefore mourn the passing of the traditional museum’s project along with that of post- Enlightenment 'objectivism'. The critical museum, or contemporary history museum, was thus forced into being by the fact that its nineteenth century predecessor had been discredited. In this sense, a museum centred on the historiographic and commemorative complexities of the Holocaust

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101 Adorno was later to broaden his attack on post-Auschwitz culture by writing that ‘all post Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.’ Negative Dialectics, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966, p. 367.

102 ‘The 'science' from which National Socialism claimed inspiration, and behind this, the idea it had of Europe and the West …directly led to Auschwitz.’, Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art and Politics, pg 50.
was always already ruined, and the formal architectural fragmentation of the Jewish Museum is an expression of this, an allegorical representation of the ruinous effects of history. In terms of Benjamin's famous formulation that '[t]here is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism', the contemporary history museum strives to limit the 'transmission' of this barbarism that formerly occurred through the museum apparatus.103 This leaves it with the revolutionary museological project of 'brushing history against the grain'.104

The Allegorical Museum, The Ruined Monument

It is in this specific sense that it is possible to understand the Jewish Museum as a kind of ruin. It is only by understanding and avoiding the dangers inherent in Speer's aestheticised and romanticised ruin, and by embracing Benjamin's melancholy, allegorical ruin, that it is possible to negotiate such an argument.

True to Benjamin's understanding of the ruin as both a product and a critical process, Libeskind sets out to 'ruin' or dismantle the tradition of architecture itself. Benjamin's concept of allegory as an element corrupting an existing tradition from within renders it particularly appropriate to this post-modernist or deconstructive position; '[f]ollowing Benjamin's account, the allegedly anti-aesthetic politics of both allegory and montage, based on an emphatic sympathy for the fragmented and the momentary, may open avenues towards autonomy and emancipation insofar as they un hinge the given symbolic order and thereby evoke a peculiar decentring of modern power.'105 Deconstruction in architecture, in particular, pursues such a 'decentring of power' by engaging in an exploration of the 'end condition' of the tradition of architecture, as it originated in antiquity with the Vitruvian ideals of function, structure, and beauty and continued without interruption through classicism to the modern movement.106 Placing his own work within this idiom, Libeskind writes that

103 Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', pp. 258-259.
104 Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 259.
105 Koepnick, 'Allegory and Power' p. 61.
106 See Peter Eisenman, 'The End of the Classical, the End of the Beginning, the End of the End', Perspecta 21, 1984, pp. 154-173
I believe that architecture has entered its end. That is not to say that architecture is finished, but that architecture has entered an end condition. I think that all those who practice architecture, whether knowingly or unknowingly, feel in some way that something has come to an end, but what it is, it is very difficult to say since it is not in the realm of objects.  

By revealing the apparent abyss of meaning on which this tradition was built, deconstruction attempts to use the discourse of architecture against itself, speculating on the limits of architectural possibility. For Libeskind, the tradition of architecture is doubly inadmissible, since it is the expression of post-Enlightenment rationalist thought which, in his view, was implicated in the formation of Nazi ideology that lead ultimately to the Holocaust.

Benjamin’s concept of allegory contains correspondences with Libeskind’s process in designing the Jewish Museum, the experience of the visitor reading it, and the museum itself as an object and mediation between historical fact and experiential truth. Most importantly, allegory expresses its own constructedness - unlike the aesthetic symbol that attempts to disguise the processes of its origination, allegory offers a re-presentation of the practice of the allegorist, which is primarily one of assemblage.

On one level, then, the Jewish Museum building has an unusually high degree of direct allegorical reference, where every detail of the building, in plan and elevation, refers to some specific historical event or figure. The relentlessness of this investment of meaning in every architectural element recalls nothing so much as Benjamin’s description of the process of the allegorist, ‘piling up fragments ceaselessly’. Libeskind has made the process of the design central to his

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109 ‘For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the
presentation of the work, specifying four texts from outside the discipline of architecture as starting points. He never offers a logical, linear progression from these points to the finished design, however, and they are allowed to remain fragmentary, part of the process, without being subsumed seamlessly into a totalised product. As I have already noted, the figurative plan form refers quite literally to the lines of German and Jewish history, one violently disjointed but continuous, the other straight but catastrophically interrupted. The motif of the fractured star of David, from which the plan was apparently abstracted, is also an obvious allegorical reference.

The Jewish Museum reflects its allegorical function most clearly in its heightened subject-object relationship, precisely as a ruin. Allegory implies an intellectual engagement, a process of deciphering on the part of the ‘reader’. Such a process is absent from the intentional monument, which is apprehended all at once, instantaneously. An allegorical museum thus suggests a meaningful engagement with history, and a reciprocal relationship with its audience. Phillipe Hamon has identified the ruin’s demand for ‘an effort of close and meticulous interpretation’ as its characteristic attribute; ‘like any other fragmented object’, its very incompleteness provokes and demands ‘acts of semantic completion’ on the part of observers. Libeskind’s building is addressed fundamentally to the people of present day Berlin, enacting a particular experience of the sublime through the haunted emptiness of its void spaces. And this provides a clue to another, darker level of allegory at work in the museum.

repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification...’ Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 178.

110 These two ‘lines’ are also ‘the two lines of contemporary dichotomy, the lines which create the rift between faith and action, between political belief and architectural response.’ Daniel Libeskind, ‘Between the Lines...’, p. 86.


Libeskind has explicitly identified the Holocaust not only as the end of
modernism, but the end of its historiographic project.\footnote{Daniel Libeskind quoted by Derrida, 'A Letter to Peter Eisenman', p. 12.} Since 'the Jewish history of
Berlin is not separable from the history of modernity, from the destiny of [the]
incineration of history', for Libeskind the scheme 'joins architecture to questions
that are now relevant to all humanity'.\footnote{Several critics have addressed the significance of the 'line' in Libeskind's work, especially in light of his drawings, Chamberworks in 1983 and the Micromegas series in 1978. See Robin Evans, 'In front of lines that leave nothing behind', AA Files 6, 1984, pp. 89-96, Stanley Allen, 'Libeskind's Practice of Laughter', Assemblage 12, August 1990, pp. 20-25, and Mark Taylor, 'Point of No Return', in Daniel Libeskind's Radix-Matrix, Architecture and Writings, Prestel, Munich and New York, 1997, pp 128-135.} As the end of history, the Holocaust would
represent a fatal rupture in measured time, the 'terminus' of the 'line' of history.\footnote{Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art and Politics, translated Chris Turner, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 45.} Libeskind is joined in this thesis by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who appropriates the
term caesura from Greek Tragedy to describe the fissure, 'that which, within
history, interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, or else closes
off all possibility of history'.\footnote{Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art and Politics, translated Chris Turner, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 45.} The caesura is an appropriate concept through which
to approach the temporality of the Jewish Museum, which manifests just such a
cataclysmic interruption of historical time on an individual, experiential level,
through the device of the void.

FRAMING ABSENCE: THE SUBLIME VOID

The void is paradoxically the most extravagant, but at the same time the most
ambiguous, affective device of the museum. The building reflects a fragmented,
disorientating and uncomfortable subjectivity through its fractured vertical and
horizontal planes and the vertiginous effects of its towering, cavernous spaces.
This gallery of spatially and emotionally disturbing effects, including the 'incoherent'
system of circulation created by the void running through the centre of the plan,
culminates in the void spaces, which are charged with the task of representing the
unpresentable. The voids thus stand for a range of historical, metahistorical, and
metaphysical ideas, and the question is how these might be conveyed to the visitor
without explicitly spelling them out, and thus destroying the affect. Here again Libeskind makes a dramatic departure from traditional monumentality: in the Jewish Museum the monolithic symbolic object has been replaced with an empty volume, so the commemorative ‘work’ can not be deflected but must be internalised and enacted by each subject. The museum is thus able to function as a memorial without monolithic monumentality, since each visitor ‘performs’ the commemoration as a function of their passage through the space. The museum is thus ‘worked through’ in a choreographed process analogous to Freud's ‘work of mourning’.

Visitors to the Jewish Museum can not be asked to experientially re-enact the Holocaust, but only to identify empathically with aesthetic representations. The aim must be to bear witness to events that happened more than fifty years ago, and to scrupulously preserve that historical distance - to keep Erfahrung separate from Erlebnis, since it would be inappropriate to literally represent the past experience of the Holocaust in the present. Unlike Speer’s monumentalised ruin, which effaces the subjectivity and temporality of the individual into a generalised ‘timelessness’, Libeskind’s museum dates and places itself firmly in history. Its deliberately contemporary appearance is a sign of this - by taking up a critical position in the present, the museum acknowledges that it is a participant not only in the interpretation of history, but in history itself. If the museum is ‘ruined’, this is a result of the repercussions and after-effects of catastrophic events carried into the present day; it is entirely engaged in the now of lived experience. The present-ation

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116 James Russell expresses the reservation that the void spaces might, 'because of their contrast with displays that are more self-explanatory... have to be explained and thereby come to seem a kind of diorama, albeit in a fashionably abstract style.' James Russell, ‘Project Diary: Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum speaks to a history that is both rich and tragic’, Architectural Record v.187, no. 1, January 1999, p. 81.


118 In fact a blurring of the two categories of experience occurs, in the highly problematic concept of ‘entertainmentality’, in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The new museum’s interactivity and desire to make learning about the past enjoyable is here manifest in a theatrical reenactment, where present day visitors are given the identity of a concentration camp inmate and follow their ‘fate’ on a guided tour through the museum. The associations of this with a theme park or interactive ‘ride’ are deeply inimical to the gravity of the subject. See Timothy Luke, 'Memorialising Mass Murder: Entertainmentality at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum', Arena Journal, no. 6, 1996, pp. 123-143.
of the past, and the immanence of the ruin in the constructed building, are two elements of the same moment.

The affective power of the museum’s void spaces lies in their ability to provoke a crisis of subjectivity; the experience of each individual visitor, their sudden sharp awareness of presence, is juxtaposed chillingly with that which is missing, the others whose absence is also suddenly palpable. The instant of presence is produced in the subject through an irreconcilable disjunction between subjective corporeal experience and absolute absence, the sudden awareness of the ‘lost object’. Jean-François Lyotard has described such a ‘representation of the unrepresentable’ as an apocalyptic, post-humanist sublime.\(^{119}\) Beyond the historical understanding of the sublime, as a transcendent aesthetic affect produced through the ‘negative pleasure’ involved in the apprehension of excessively large, complex, or powerful objects, Lyotard’s postmodern sublime engages the subject in a crisis of temporal self-presentation. This affect is especially characteristic of abstract expressionist art, and in particular the paintings of Barnett Newman, engaged, according to Lyotard, with ‘making the viewer present’. ‘Presence’, he writes, ‘is the instant which interrupts the chaos of history and which recalls, or simply calls out that ‘there is.’\(^{120}\) Sublime affect originates in a momentary but cataclysmic confusion between absence and presence, past and present, the instant and eternity, and the void spaces in the Jewish museum provoke this confusion by standing simultaneously for infinity and for absolute zero.

Mark Cousins writes of the sublime not as a means of escaping or existing outside of totality, but of reconstituting it as a function of the subject-object relationship. He writes that, in the sublime, ‘totality is an attribute, not of the object but of the subject, and of the subject’s relation to the object. The subject of the sublime, who now, in an important sense, has become, if not the work of art, then

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part of its work, is completed within the moment of sublimity.\textsuperscript{121} The category of totality could thus be present in the Jewish Museum in an unexpected form, not because it is complete and totalising in itself, but precisely because it is not: because it is unfinished and ‘ruined’ before the fact. Following Cousins’ logic, it is not only the object of the ruin, but the subject of the observer that is momentarily completed by the sublime, in a psychological transaction that takes place in the space of representation. More importantly for the question of historical, aesthetic and experiential truth, Cousins conceives the sublime as redefining the subject itself as ‘the work of art’.

Sublime affect, when understood in these terms, is therefore a means by which a profound engagement may be enacted between the present subject and the historical object. This encounter is the nexus of the Jewish Museum experience, and it is, in every sense of the word, aesthetic. Quite apart from changing modes and methods of display, interactivity, and the use of technology and new media which all bring the contemporary history museum closer to the techniques and concerns of contemporary art, it is an aesthetic engagement on the deepest level - an experience of historical truth more than an abstracted apprehension of facts. This chapter has shown that the traditional division between the realm of history and the realm of aesthetics is permeable, that each is profoundly implicated in the other. Through the analysis of the Jewish Museum it has shown that the relationship is both particularly close, and particularly fraught, in a museum charged with the representation of an unspeakable history. In the absence or impossibility of finding ‘meaning’ in the events of the Holocaust, the Jewish Museum displaces its search for historical truth into experiential truth through aesthetic affect. And herein lies the ultimate significance of its project: by resurrecting the unity of the subject and affirming life in the present, it communicates the most important aspect of its critique of history - that the events it commemorates must never be allowed to happen again.

CONCLUSIONS: EXPERIENCE AND AFFECT

Through the evocation of absence, Libeskind is able to subvert ‘metanarrative’ history from within the museum. Such a history aims to locate human actions and events in a significant and progressive sequence, and accordingly, it demands a meaningful closure and conclusion. But there simply was no redemption for the victims of the Nazi regime, it was not martyrdom in the pure sense, of voluntary sacrifice. The Holocaust unveiled no fundamental, metaphysical truth, in fact it can be seen to have revealed the absence of any such truth, as an ‘apocalypse without revelation’.\textsuperscript{122} The Jewish Museum reflects the impossibility of closure in historiographic terms by repeating it architecturally, as a refusal of monumentality, completion, and unity. Its formal architectural fragmentation signifies that the museum is perpetually ‘open’ to interpretation and meaningful engagement with the past, which it is never categorically ‘finished’. Such an avoidance of a conventional ‘retelling’ of history, while not descending into the chaos of relativism, emphasises the fate of individual subjects. Far from providing an overriding historical justification or ‘meaning’, it can provide only the secondary consolation of a vehicle for expressing the anguish of meaninglessness.

The Jewish museum is aesthetic in the sense that it is an art work, and in the sense that it must bring history to presentation through aesthetic devices. I have argued here that it is also deeply engaged in producing aesthetic affect in its visitors, and herein lies a crucial link to broader trends in the theory and practice of museums: Libeskind’s museum is engaged in establishing a new balance between historical facts and present experience. In other museums this has led to an increasing employment of interactive devices, new media and new technology, and spatial installations; concerns which are shared, significantly, with much contemporary art practice. What this seems to indicate is that the Jewish Museum, like some other contemporary museums, is engaged in balancing truth in art and truth in history, and re-valuing the role of art in this relationship.

Concepts of historical and aesthetic truth have long been thought to be antithetical, and their distinction has been enshrined in the disciplinary split between art museums and those dealing with human and natural history. The traditional distinction between the art museum and the history museum has been enacted on the belief that they address alternate and contradictory concepts, however this chapter has argued that they are really two sides of the same coin. They are merely two rhetorics by which the subject approaches the object under the concept of truth. To read the Jewish Museum simply as a built work of art would be to miss its attempt to represent historical truth, and to read it only as a history museum would be to miss its sophisticated aesthetic response to the problems of representing an unpresentable history. In the contemporary history museum aesthetic affect is used as a kind of mediator, such that the individual subject's experience of truth exist in the space between the unknowable or unmasterable past, and the contingencies of historical interpretation. The museum can only go so far in representing an unspeakable history, whereafter art can and must take over.

At the time when the Jewish Museum first opened, there were many who called for the building to remain permanently empty, arguing that this was the most appropriate representation and evocation of the events it sought to commemorate. And it is true that, visiting it then, the building was deeply affecting in its very emptiness, an emptiness that went beyond the strategy of presenting absence that was already built into the design. Its very lack of function, or rather the refusal to take up its function, seemed a kind of mute apology, both an excess and a falling short. But the episode is also revealing of much else about the position of museums in contemporary culture, the role of museum architecture both as art and artefact, apparatus and object of display, and the complexities of the museum object. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this is the idea that history and historiography, the objects of the museum, were also somehow infused into its architectural material. The broader crisis of the museum object can be seen in the formal fragmentation of its architecture. All of these questions and conclusions will be taken up again, with a different object, in the next chapter.

This chapter opened with a discussion of the curious fact that when the Jewish Museum building first opened it was empty of objects and displays, and yet it still proved extremely ‘popular’ with paying visitors. This forms an important link
with the chapter to come, in which the National Museum of Australia is approached through the expansion and problematisation of the idea of the ‘popular’.
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Theme-Park or Mausoleum: ‘Black Armband’ Populism at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

So perhaps now the cast immediately becomes a kind of substitution, standing-in or standing-by or standing-up for what can only be invisible. To make an architecture which is thoroughly residual, thoroughly reticent, as if to become a witness, becoming an exact alternative, as if waiting to be filled, waiting for all the people, like filling up the cast, a seething confluence made present, as if now to signify those four strong winds of time, that field of bones, that white stone, that present.¹

Howard Raggatt

The National Museum is a profound intellectual mistake as well as a great waste of public money. Indeed, the museum is already a museum piece itself – an expensive relic of postmodern theory. Apart from a few of the indigenous displays, it is not a real museum at all. It is a repository of nothing more than the intellectual poverty of the tertiary-educated middle-class of the post-Vietnam War era. It is not only one in the eye for the Howard government but also for the nation itself.²

Keith Windschuttle

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA AS PROJECT

The National Museum of Australia (NMA) was designed by Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM) and Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan, architects in association, and opened in March 2001. Even before its opening, the museum served to polarise the architectural community in Australia. As a building, the NMA is highly complex in both physical and conceptual terms. It is also loud and gregarious: from its controversial strategy of literally appropriating elements from other canonical modernist works, through the coded messages of the Braille patterns on its surface, to the conceptual device of the extruded string and red ‘knot’ which passes through and around the building’s form, it is relentless in its challenge to conventional institutional architecture. The issues it raises, sometimes incidentally but most often in a deliberate and provocative manner, are also complex and significant. There is little clear distinction here between the museum as a work of architecture, and the museum as narrative and institution. This is particularly true in terms of the over-riding allegory – of Australia as many threads tangled together – which informs both the architecture and the museological strategy. But it is also true of the architecture itself as public culture – the building insists upon participating boldly in a broad discourse about Australian national history and identity. For a national institution located in the national capital, this is a particularly high-risk strategy, and of all the remarkable aspects of the NMA, perhaps the most astonishing is that it was ever constructed in this form at all.

There is much that remains to be said about the NMA, as a building and as a museum. To its critics the NMA is a collection of quotations, borrowed devices, and stolen motifs, itself a ‘museum of architecture’. While ARM are somewhat notorious for this practice in their earlier works, the stakes are higher in the

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3 Conrad Hamann makes the point that the NMA’s appropriations themselves constitute a form of collecting, such that ‘[t]he Museum’s built fabric becomes itself a museum of Architecture - drawn partly from Australia and partly from the general experience of Modern architecture’s world history.’ [Conrad Hamann, ‘Enigma variations: The National Museum of Australia and the AIATSIS Centre’, Art Monthly, 138 (April 2001): 8.] This is a particularly interesting reading in light of the fact that architecture, of all the arts, is least easy to present in museums, and indeed constitutes a dilemma in this respect. Abstraced representations such as drawings and models can be exhibited easily enough, but are always inadequate to reproduce the spatial qualities and scale of the real thing. If ARM have produced a kind of ‘museum of architecture’ at the NMA, then, the real dispute seems to be over the ‘authenticity’ of its ‘artefacts’.
FIGURE 13: Site plans of NMA (above) and Jewish Museum (below) showing ARM’s appropriation of the plan of the Jewish Museum for the Gallery of the First Australians.
National Museum, not least because of the choice of subjects, which as I have already noted includes part of the plan of Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin in the design of Gallery of the First Australians. The connections this draws between the Jewish Holocaust in the Second World War, and the consequences of white settlement for Australian Aborigines, are as clear as they are contentious. There are also a whole range of other issues raised here, about the availability of architecture for literal appropriation, and whether this is indeed plagiarism, about appropriation as a strategy in postmodern art, about the currency, or lack thereof, of postmodernism itself in art and architecture, about design processes and methods of form-finding in contemporary architecture, and about architecture as political discourse and representation more generally. These questions and their implications have yet to be fully explored.

But my interest in the building here is quite specific: while a significant proportion of the critical comment the building has received in Australia has centred around its apparent contravention of standards of propriety in civic architecture, it has also been widely read as ‘populist’. This chapter examines the buildings’ challenge to conventional institutional architecture, its colour, its playful and obtuse character, and its avowed ‘anti-monumentality’, in light of this supposed ‘populism’. The chapter ultimately finds that there is an aesthetic of populism that exists quite independently of actual popularity, or even a relationship with popular culture. It argues that the NMA presents and problematises the question of populism in formal architectural terms. More than this, though, it proposes the idea that museums are poised on the threshold of a major historical shift in their role and function in society, a shift that can be hinged around the dual ideas of popularity and populism.

Perhaps is seems risky to base such a far-reaching proposition on a building at once so new and so contentious. Given that it is a national institution, in the Australian national capital, the NMA is particularly subject to opinion, and the mandate to comment upon it has been widely exercised, in often vociferous tones. But while I will draw briefly upon some of these reviews and critical opinions, I will also rely upon the topical currency of the project, and avoid both detailed

This chapter’s straying into such territory can be justified by recourse to the museum’s own strategy which, to paraphrase the inaugural director Dawn Casey, is concerned not only with history, but with history as it unfolds in the present.\footnote{Dawn Casey quoted by Stephen Brook, ‘Azaria’s black dress view of history’, \textit{The Australian}, (March 8, 2001): 5} It must also be clearly marked as a speculation – this chapter is not intended to be a specific critical appraisal of one building, nor as a purely abstract meditation on trends in museum theory, but something in between. It uses a specific example to open a speculative discussion of how this museum – and more specifically, this museum \textit{building} - might propose or manifest broader issues in the history and theory of museums. In order of scale, then, the chapter examines the politics of the popular in museums, architecture, and the NMA: a specific work of museum architecture.\footnote{I have borrowed the expression ‘Politics of the popular’ from Tony Bennett, and indeed much of the argument in this chapter is indebted to his writing on the theory of popular culture, and of museums.}

THE PUBLIC AND THE POPULAR

As I have already noted, the modern museum is public by definition. It is a commonplace of museum history that the origin of the modern institution was the forced opening of the French Royal collection in 1793, during the popular uprising of the French Revolution. The political power of museums had already been
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FIGURE 14: The five-sided red ‘thread’ around which the National Museum of Australia building is ‘cast’.
recognised by other governments, and the Louvre was not the first European state collection to be opened to the public. But the drama and violence of its opening provides a potent symbol of democracy winning out over sovereignty, and of the museum as a founding pillar and instrument of democratic ideals. In contrast, Australian museums were 'born modern', as Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves have noted; 'no revolutions, either intellectual or political, were required to break down their doors.' But, as they continue, such museums 'were unquestionably also creatures of their times and of the class of their creators - open to the public, free to all, and yet until the beginning of the twentieth century open only during the hours when most people were at work.'

The origins of Australia’s museums may have missed some of the revolutionary fervour of their European counterparts, but in them endured a subtle lesson in civics. In spite of pretences to democratic equality, early museums were instruments for inculcating reverence for certain high cultural forms, reinforcing class and value systems, and perhaps most importantly for constituting 'society' and 'the public' as such. Such museums played an important role as edifying and educational institutions - the 'people', that is the working classes, were explicitly intended to be 'improved' by their contact with the products of the 'elite' ruling classes. This is further demonstrated in the fact that such museums also excluded the artefacts of ‘popular’ culture, the culture of the people. The exhibition of popular culture runs against the grain of the museum's traditional focus on canonical, high cultural paragons of excellence, as well as its long-held hegemony over standards of quality and value, both aesthetic and historiographic. Historically, museums exhibited only the most exemplary artefacts produced by a culture, whether authentic masterpieces or authentic historical artefacts. Popular culture was seen

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7 Edward P Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1979, pp 22-23
9 See Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture*, p 4, where he writes: 'If museums exist simply to reflect high culture, even if this involves bringing this to a mass audience, then broadly speaking popular culture is invalid. Material has a place in the museum as high culture, either as an authentic masterpiece (art) or as an authentic artefact (science, history, archaeology, etc.). The material culture of popular culture, what we might term "popular material culture," is considered non-authentic, [not] belonging among ... 'proper' museum material.'
as spurious or inferior history, and as such was mutually exclusive from the museum’s objective: to provide an ideal to which the populace could aspire.10

As I have also noted earlier in the dissertation, the idea of the museum as a ‘disciplinary’ institution, engaged in social control and the constitution of a ‘public’ made up of ‘citizens’, has been pursued to influential effect by Tony Bennett, following the work of Michel Foucault.11 He finds that much of the museum’s power, as an instrument by which citizens can both identify with and be identified by nation and state, derives from its being both open to and symbolic property of the people.12 But just because early museums were public, at least nominally open and accessible to all, does not mean they were also popular.

The revolution that marked the opening of the first modern museum was merely the first step in a long process of further ‘democratisation’, which acts against both the explicit and implicit workings of power in the museum in the hope of producing a more truly public institution.13 That process continues to this day. But

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10 The idea of a national museum for Australia was first proposed as early as 1902, but as Anderson and Reeves write, ‘it was not until after the First World War, with its blood sacrifice and influence on the industrialization of the Australian economy, that the idea of a national museum became a possible metaphor for Australian nationalism.’ Up until that time, especially in the early years of the colony, there was a perception that Australia didn’t have any ‘real’ history yet, a sensibility which took no account of either Aboriginal history (as opposed to ethnological collection of Aboriginal artefacts) or the artefacts and stories of the common people of the colony. Anderson and Reeves, ‘Contested Identities’, pp 92-93


12 Bennett has also drawn a link between the public and the popular in museums. See Tony Bennett, ‘Introduction: popular culture and ‘the turn to Gramsci’; in Colin Mercer, Tony Bennett, and Janet Woollacott (eds), Popular Culture and Social Relations, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986, pp xi-xix; Tony Bennett, ‘The politics of ‘the popular’ and popular culture’, in Mercer, Bennett, and Woollacott (eds), Popular Culture and Social Relations, pp 6-21; and Tony Bennett, ‘Museums and ‘the people’’, in Lumley ed., The Museum Time Machine, pp 63-85.

13 This democratisation is partly based on the assumption that, in simplest terms, people will feel more welcome in a museum in which they can recognise themselves, one that doesn’t ignore their very existence. It centres partly around questions of representation, then, and a more truly representative picture of the diversity and heterogeneity of society. It also turns on questions of access – encompassing physical access and the general accommodation of the
the fact that museums are often now framed as being both public and popular institutions marks the occurrence of another – this time populist – revolution. That this one has been largely silent and unremarked only proves its significance. Museums have never been as popular as they are today, neither with politicians, nor cultural commentators, nor architects, nor the general public itself. But this in itself is a telling statement – museums have also become increasingly popular with the elite. It also reveals the value of the popular as an analytical tool – popularity means something quite different when used in the context of politics, aesthetics, or broader cultural discourse. The fact that it does intersect all of these varied realms, and yet is generally ignored, is both curious and significant. For a national museum to set out to be ‘popular’ seems quite logical in the common contemporary meaning of the word, that it should be liked by a large number of people. But while ‘popular’ seems an innocent enough term, its derivatives ‘populist’ and ‘populism’ have decidedly more ambivalent implications. In order to explore these further, I will turn now to the example of the National Museum of Australia.

THEME PARKS AND MAUSOLEUMS

Peter Ward, writing shortly after the opening of the NMA in the Australian of 9 March 2001, observed that former Prime Minister Paul Keating had been dubious, whilst in power, about the idea of building a national museum in Canberra, concerned that ‘it might be “another marble mausoleum” in the Parliamentary Triangle’.14 Implying that Keating favoured a ‘populist aesthetic’ because it was different needs of people with disabilities, but also what might be called sociological accessibility. This is informed by a relatively new branch of research that analyses which sectors of society actually visit museums and why, and by extension why other sectors do not. This work has helped to reveal who the museum public actually is, and thus assisted in improving accessibility to a wider populace. Kevin Moore describes the process as ‘...a significant movement from within the profession over the past two decades to “democratise” museums. Opening access to a redefined canon of high culture is seen as only half of this process; equal stress has been placed on the need to redefine the subject matter of the museum to include the lives of the mass of the population, to reflect the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, popular culture alongside high culture.’ Moore, Museums and Popular Culture, p. 1. See also Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D Lavine (eds), Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1992.

more closely aligned with Labour party policy, Ward goes on to describe the now completed museum thus:

As it has emerged, it is an elaborate, theatrical stage for sometimes chimerical concepts of national identity and an astonishing range of high and low art, kitsch and ephemera. Its 4000sq m of displays range from such drolleries as Phar Lap’s pickled heart and Azaria Chamberlain’s savaged baby clothes to the very serious art and artifacts of the Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Taking all together, it’s theme park Australia.\(^{15}\)

Ward’s description ranges across both the exhibits and the architecture of the new museum, and indeed there is a high level of cohesion between architectural and museological strategies in the NMA. But for my purposes here, Ward’s article is most interesting in its proposition of two possible models for the museum: on the one hand a ‘mausoleum’, and on the other a ‘theme park’. Ward is not the first to use these terms in opposition, and contemporary museums can be seen to range across a scale which runs from the older ‘mausoleum’ model on the one hand, to the ascendant but still not universal ‘theme park’ model on the other. It is notable that both of these terms can and have been used as insults, with varying degrees of vitriol, by critics positioned at both ends of the scale.\(^{16}\) It is also no coincidence that the ‘theme park’ and ‘mausoleum’ models correspond with a parallel scale of popular appeal, that is to say a theme park is self-evidently populist, while a mausoleum is not. The two models are primarily distinguished by their explicit \textit{signification} of popularity. The stake here is a notion of civic decorum or propriety, which enacts prohibitions over what kinds of institutions can be explicit in their display or representation of popularity. What makes museums particularly interesting in this context is that they are presently undergoing a shift in definition,


\(^{16}\) There is nothing new in this - throughout their history ‘serious’ museums have sought to distance themselves from their populist counterparts, namely circuses, fairs and freak shows, of which the theme park is merely the most recent and technologically advanced example. Indeed as David Goodman has shown, many museums defined themselves in specific opposition to such attractions. It was not the actual popularity of such menageries that was the problem, but their emphasis on spectacle, on the freak or curious object rather than the exemplar. Attempting to establish their basis in rational, empirical observation and categorisation, early museums could ill afford to be associated with such flippancy. See David Goodman, ‘Fear of circuses: Founding the National Museum of Victoria’, in David Boswell and Jessica Evans (eds), \textit{Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, heritage and museums}, Routledge, London, 1999, p 267.
moving away from the earlier ‘edificatory’ model, towards the twenty-first century immersive museum, with its generalised notions of ‘experience’ and ‘edutainment’.17

To state the obvious, a museum in the theme park mould might be expected to have an emphasis on entertainment, possibly directed at school-aged children, and to reflect its light-hearted tone in spectacular or at least unconventional architecture. It might be expected, in a word, to be populist. The mausoleum model, on the other hand, implies an institution that is solemn and educational, perhaps reflected in a conventionally monumental institutional architecture. The NMA has, with a few exceptions,18 been unproblematically assumed to fit the former, theme park mould. But I would argue that this is a misapprehension, or at least an oversimplification, and indeed that the NMA presents and problematises the question of popularity in formal architectural terms. This leads to a proposition: that there is a ‘look’ of populism that exists independently of any intended or actual popularity, or even a connection with popular culture. I would argue that the NMA opens an elaborate play on this ‘look’ of the popular, and that it does so by manipulating certain key aesthetic devices: bright colour, literal and figurative elements, visual jokes and non-orthogonal forms, for instance, and I will return to these in more depth below. Such devices carry a weight of expectation and association, they cause a building to be read or socially recognised as being populist, regardless of other measures of actual popularity. In fact this look of populism relies on a pre-existing set of dichotomies, specifically between ‘high’ and (for want of a better term) ‘low’ architecture. The existence and inherent value system of such dichotomies has been identified by the field of popular culture studies. It is worth examining the general conclusions of that discourse, and defining the terms of the debate – popularity, populism and popular culture - more specifically, before returning to the example of the NMA.


THE POLITICS OF THE POPULAR

Dominic Strinati, following Raymond Williams, has noted the changing meaning of the complex term 'popular culture', especially following a 'shift in perspective' it underwent between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Popular culture ... still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which, of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap. The recent sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves is different from all of these; it is often displaced to the past as folk culture but it is also an important modern emphasis.19

The ambivalent connotations of the term centre around a series of binary oppositions, foremost amongst which is that between 'popular', 'vernacular' or 'low' culture, and 'high' or 'elite' culture. High culture has historically been the privileged term in the opposition, the value system of which is so pervasive that anything which is 'popular' is often immediately assumed not only to be inferior, but gaudy and unsophisticated as well. High culture is specifically celebrated and enshrined by institutions, of which museums are among the most powerful, and traditionally represented by expensive, prestigious, and enduring architecture. Making a direct reversal of this logic, a populist architecture might be expected to use low-status or 'cheap' materials, and give the impression of being flimsy. It is no coincidence that these are all criticisms that have been directed at the NMA.

'Populism' has a similarly negative connotation when used in political discourse; McGuigan writes that it is commonly used to accuse rivals of 'the mobilisation of political majorities around a set of simple ... disingenuous slogans'.20

The accusation of populism, he writes, 'implies reckless and unscrupulous demagogy.'21 Here the connection with national identity is clear - populist politicians are accused by their political opponents of using nationalism as a cheap ideological

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tool. Politically, the opposite of populism is 'elitism', but there is no salvation to be had there, since 'being thought an elitist is just as bad as being a populist, if not worse. Both 'populist' and 'elitist' are, in effect, terms of abuse, used by intellectuals..."22 Nevertheless, it is not hard to see that many of the pejorative implications of the 'popular', the 'populist' and 'populism' stem from a silent elitism, which continues to value 'high' culture over 'low', in spite of the breakdown of these hierarchies undertaken by postmodernism.

This is nowhere more evident than in the high arts, including architecture. Successive waves of the aesthetic avant-garde have incorporated and redeemed elements of low or popular culture in their work, but the result is almost inevitably still regarded as high art, appreciated by aficionados whose taste is affirmed by their ability to see through the pop cultural references to the serious intent. Incursions from 'above' are frequent, as intellectuals, artists or historians take some element of popular culture and re-value it according to new criteria. This is a common enough form of radical chic, but it only serves to illustrate the legitimating power that high culture holds: the traffic is almost exclusively one way. An artist who is perceived to have 'sold out', making their work more 'accessible' in order to achieve popular approval and commercial success, is described pejoratively as 'populist'.23 This is based upon the assumption that high art is aesthetically demanding, whereas popular or vernacular art is facile to produce and easily understood.

A similar criticism has been levelled at museum exhibitions of popular culture,24 which have been associated with the 'dumbing down' or 'stupidification' of

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22 McGuigan, Cultural Populism, p 2.
23 McGuigan, Cultural Populism, p 2.
24 In popular culture studies today, debate still rages around the question of whether popular culture arises from the people themselves, or whether it is in fact foisted upon them from 'above' by an intellectual elite. The former would be a means by which the people might subvert or resist the dominant 'high' culture, while the latter would be an instrument by which this same dominant culture would keep the populace quiescent and subordinated, in what might be called the 'bread and circuses' model. This debate is made even more pointed by the fact that the intellectual or academic study of popular culture is by definition not populist - herein lies the paradoxical nature of popular culture: it was and is identified and defined by intellectuals. Jim McGuigan identifies the origins of the study of popular culture in the late eighteenth century, contemporaneous with the rise of industrial capitalism and the French and American revolutions. In his view this new focus on popular culture was partly motivated by aesthetic concerns, but was also political: "The discovery of popular culture was... an
the institution to the ‘lowest common denominator’. The rhetoric is familiar: criticism of commercial television, film, and indeed much of the mass media employs similar expressions, which are countered in turn with accusations of elitism. Nevertheless the exhibition of popular culture goes hand in hand with populism, and popular accessibility, and has emerged as a driving force in contemporary exhibition culture and policy - from the prevalence of interactive educational devices aimed at school-aged children, to the new emphasis on the museum as entertainment venue, and the phenomenon of the travelling, ‘blockbuster’ exhibition. There is more at stake here than a simple reversal of the value system that positioned the museum as the collector and keeper of high culture, such that it is now a facilitator of a generalised, popular form of 'cultural experience', and, one might add, seller of cultural merchandise. But for this chapter the real relevance of the museum’s newly popularised position lies in its implications for museum architecture. If the rise of populism is marked in the contents of museums, I would argue that it is possible to identify a parallel trend in their form – that is to say, in museum architecture.

There is an important distinction to be made here, then, between ‘populism’ and ‘popularity’. ‘Populism’ has the negative connotation of deliberately seeking popular acceptance at the cost of quality, intellectual rigour, or formal aesthetic value. ‘Popularity’ still retains its more neutral modern sense, either of actual public involvement, or of things that are socially recognised as popular – in the way that football is seen to be more popular than opera. Old systems of thought endure, and politics, museums, and architecture are each subject to an unspoken hierarchy that sees ‘populism’, if not actual popularity, as inferior.

The question of aesthetic elitism is particularly pointed in museum buildings. Purpose-built museums are amongst the most complex and prestigious buildings being constructed today. They have come to be seen as something of a forum for virtuoso or 'signature' architecture; as Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani

expressly political move, related to ideas of nationhood; thereby linked to a third constitutive feature of modernity, the formation of national identity, in addition to industrialisation and democratisation.' McGuigan, Cultural Populism., p 10

26 See the Fall 1990 issue of New Perspectives Quarterly, dedicated to ‘The Stupidification of America’.
FIGURE 15. ‘Popularity’ and ‘populism’: Visitors to the Musee d’Orsay, Paris, (above), and the ‘lively’ interactive exhibits of the apparently ‘populist’ Te Papa, the National Museum of New Zealand, (below).
writes, '[c]ontemporary museum buildings tend to be astonishingly pure materializations of their authors' corresponding attitudes towards architecture: they are seismographs of the architecutonic culture to which they belong.' It is clear that this so-called 'iconic' architecture has an important role in museum marketing, very often providing the institution's logo, being strongly identified with the institution as a 'brand', and even functioning as an international tourist attraction – as is especially evident in the case of the Jewish Museum. Museum architecture has long had an important role in framing and representing the museum's ideology and apparatus, as well as its contents. In recent years that role has become more explicit, and more highly valued, even as museums have come to question and challenge their traditional role and purpose.

FLIRTING WITH THE FLIPPANT: ARCHITECTURE, COLOUR, AND POPULISM

The very definition of Architecture with a capital 'A' is based on its distinction from and elevation above 'mere' building. It is the existence of architects, then, as reflexive, educated design professionals, interlocutors between people and buildings, that prevents architecture from being a truly 'popular' art in the sense of being made by the people for themselves. The distinction between high and low cultures is thus inherent in architecture, and is not easily abandoned. Populism in architecture is also hedged about with prohibitions springing from the view that a deliberately populist architecture is somehow fraudulent. Associated above all with commercialism and entertainment, such populism is seen to work against a particular ideology of architectural morality - truth to materials, structure and function - that was articulated in the late eighteenth century and refined through the rationalist and functionalist doctrines of modernism and safeguarded by a

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27 The other obvious example of this would be Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. On the museum as a tourist attraction, see Barbara Hirschblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.

profession constituted in law. A piece of serious, civic, monumental architecture should neither set out expressly to be popular, nor to look like it is, so the logic goes: if a work of high architecture happens to gain popular acclaim, then that is a happy accident. Of course it is in fact an ideal outcome for both architects and clients: a respectable work of architecture that is also well liked by the public. But there are significant reasons why such popularity must be seen to be incidental to other, more lofty concerns.

Now the fact that in the NMA design architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall have breached many of these unspoken rules is hardly surprising, given their previous work, and their self-defined role as architect provocateurs. An engagement with both ‘popular’ taste and ‘elite’ conceptual approaches could indeed be seen as idiomatic of a certain school of Melbourne architecture, and distinctive to its particular mode of avant-gardeism. This is a lineage that passes through Robert Venturi, the American Pop Art of figures like Andy Warhol, the more politicised British equivalent in the Independent Group, and earlier modernist incarnations such as Dada. In the high arts, avant-garde postures in general are characterised by a lack of popular acceptance in the present, and indeed to a certain extent must seek this unpopularity - as both the cost and the sign of an acceptance to be gained in the future. A work such as the NMA which draws elements from both low and high culture is thus enacting a complex game, weaving together both vanguard and avant-garde positions. But more than this - a work that uses elements from popular culture at a formal level must deliberately remain ‘unpopular’ at the level of taste if it is to retain its avant-garde status. The NMA thus undertakes a sophisticated discourse on the politics of popularity in architecture, revealing some of the contradictions inherent in the very idea. It can be described as an architecture that has the look of the popular, but without the intention of a simple or naive populism.29 This is nowhere more evident than in its use of colour.

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29 It is in this sense that the building might be described as vernacular. The concept of the vernacular crosses several of the terms at play here: in language, the vernacular refers to the colloquial, informal, idiomatic vocabulary of a particular region or place. In architecture, it has the related meaning of a style or method of building that has arisen from the climatic or cultural conditions specific to a place. In both of these senses, the vernacular arises from the lives and concerns of the common people. In its specificity, inventiveness, and lack of adherence to convention, it embodies many of the positive attributes of ‘popular’ culture, and
Of all the architectural devices or motifs that I have specified as causing the NMA to be read as populist, colour is perhaps the most emblematic. It is clear that certain aspects of the building’s reception - as playful, obtuse, and flippant – have been profoundly coloured, so to speak, by its colour. Part of the reason for this can be found in architectural history, where the use and value of colour has a long genealogy. One could cite the use of bright colour in ancient Greek and Roman architecture, the importance of brilliantly coloured mosaic and stained glass to sacred architecture in the Byzantine and medieval periods, and the primacy of colour in non-Western architectural traditions both ancient and modern. It would be possible to trace prohibitions against the use of applied colour, derived from late 18th century notions of architectural morality – ideals demanding authenticity, honesty and directness in the expression of structure, function and materials. This puritan strand could be pursued into the modern movement, to its quasi-pathological attachment to whiteness. It would also be possible to note a trend which ran counter to dominant modernist attitudes to colour, in the eclectic ‘neon historicist’ architecture of post-modernism. What is significant for my purposes here is that this history is marked throughout by many of the same, largely unspoken, prohibitions against colour that can be traced across other cultural realms – that which David Batchelor has described as a history of ‘chromophobia’.

Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity.... [T]his purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one, colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other it is

30 Mark Wigley writes that the primacy of whiteness in high modernist architecture (particularly the work of Le Corbusier) lies partly in the removal of decoration. [The] erasure of decoration is portrayed [by Le Corbusier] as the necessary gesture of a civilized society. Indeed, civilization is defined as the elimination of the “superfluous” in favour of the “essential” and the paradigm of inessential surplus is decoration.’ Mark Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, pp. 2-3
perceived merely as a secondary quantity of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration.\(^{31}\)

Numerous examples of the attempt to ‘purge’ colour can be identified throughout the history of architecture, and the mode of chromophobia particular to it can perhaps be summarised thus: colour in architecture has been associated with illusion and frivolity, and thus with decoration – it has been seen as being excess or supplementary to ‘real’ architecture.\(^{32}\) Discussions of colour in architecture can never be completely distinguished from discussions of ornament, or of materiality. Colour is not necessarily a problem in itself – it is acceptable, for instance, when it is inherent to the material or to its weathering process, as in the bright green of copper verdigris. It is the application of colour, in the form of paint or stain, which raises questions of authenticity. The importance of surface and colour have been consistently made subordinate to architectural form. In the twentieth century and beyond, a work of ‘serious’ Architecture (as opposed to vernacular, commercial, or ‘popular’ architecture) has most often either been white, or coloured in the subdued palette afforded by the inherent characteristics of ‘natural’ materials.\(^{33}\) This is nowhere more true than in monumental architecture generally, and museum architecture in particular.


\(^{32}\) The notable exception to this is the architecture of schools, which is emblematic in itself: colour is appealing to children, so the logic would go, because they have undeveloped, ‘primitive’ tastes.

\(^{33}\) William Braham has perceptively examined the allure of ‘natural’ materials and colours in the modern period. He writes that ‘the natural can only be understood as a somewhat flexible category of finishes, not by a single principle of use, manufacture, or appearance. The fact that a family of paint colours – neutrals, ochres, and other earth colours – fit within the definition of natural is only partly explained by their original manufacture with naturally occurring mineral compounds. Though they are opaque surface coatings, they resemble the tones produced in natural materials by weathering.’ He goes on to say that the ‘natural/neutral palette’ is characterised by ‘the difficult pursuit of authenticity’, and this question goes indeed to the heart of the issue of colour in architecture. William W. Braham, ‘A Wall of Books: The Gender of Natural Colours in Modern Architecture’, *JAE – Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 53. No.1, September 1999, p. 10.
MUSEUMS AND THEIR STAKE IN THE NEUTRAL MONOCROME

Much of the dignity and status of monumental institutional architecture is taken from prestigious materials, valued for their expense, rarity, or durability. Museum buildings are required to last, and thus traditionally have not only used enduring materials, but materials which demonstrated their durability by being self-finishing in their natural, apparently neutral, state (which, interestingly, is the case with the Jewish Museum). The very idea that ‘natural’ materials are also somehow ‘neutral’ opens onto another, more ideological investment that the museum has in avoiding colour. Museums have long held a stake in the idea of an objective stance, and maintained the pretence of an unmediated presentation of historical fact. The notion of the museum as ‘white cube’ embodies all of this – the idea of the white cube, with its formal form and achromatic colour, signifies purity and transcendence. Just as the whiteness of modern architecture was a continuation of the hygienic whiteness of doctor’s coat, bathroom tiles, and hospital walls, the whiteness of the museum signifies clinical objectivity. It also, perhaps more significantly, stands for the ideal of the tabula rasa, the clean slate upon which the documentary evidence of art, history, or any other metanarrative could be methodically examined and arranged. For the museum, abandoning the neutrality of its public presentation may also mean a symbolic abandonment of objectivity. It would mean, if not a surrender to partiality, at least the admission of partiality – and the renunciation of universal whiteness for the specificities of colour. In the modern period, applied colour could never be neutral, but was read as mask, disguise, or stain.

In the postmodern period, it is still a courageous museum that is willing to cash in the chips of its cultural authority, of which prestigious monumental architecture remains a powerful source. Most museums are still, if not white, at least respectably neutral, inside and out. But not so the NMA. In its polychromatic

34 But perhaps more important than actual durability in institutional architecture is the appearance of durability, and this appearance is undermined by protective treatments like paint, whether coloured or not. Materials which are seen as flimsy or fragile may as well be coloured, so the logic goes, since they require constant re-painting anyway, and since it fits their low status.
35 Mark Wigley, White Walls, p. 5.
FIGURE 16: National Museum of Australia: architectural quotations and visual jokes.
formal complexity, the NMA could hardly be further from a ‘white cube’ museum – externally, there is hardly a neutral tone in sight. For that matter, there is hardly a ‘natural’ material in sight either – the majority of the building is constructed from pre-formed aluminium panelling in grey, yellow, red and khaki, crossed in places by sweeping calligraphic symbols. The dramatic aerial loop at the museum’s entry is white and bright orange. There are walls of black dimpled pre-formed concrete, blue painted poles, a ‘Mexican wave’ of multicoloured steel sheets, and of course the richly cacophonous Garden of Australia Dreams. There are also some deliberate plays on the connotations of colour – Le Corbusier’s gleaming white modernist classic, the Villa Savoye, is reversed and reconstituted in black, corrugated steel. The fact that this forms part of the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is a hint of the building’s clear, even dangerously frank, employment of colour symbolism. Given the architects’ previous work, we can safely assume that in this case, as elsewhere in the building, the choice of colours is calculated for maximum rhetorical effect. But I am less concerned here with the specific ploys of the architects than with the ways in which the building’s reception has been conditioned by its employment of colour, specifically the ways in which it has been construed as populist.

A ‘HAPPY THEME PARK TO MEDIOCRITY’?

The question of populism in the NMA, and many differing interpretations of its possible value or utility, emerged in the first flurry of critical reaction following the building’s opening. Two accounts in particular bear further examination, in relation to the present argument. First, that of the respected Canberra-based critic and academic Stephen Frith, who reviewed the building for the Canberra Times. After first saying that postmodern appropriative practices such as those advocated by Robert Venturi, of ‘high art using low art’, are themselves ‘dated, tired and

36 Aluminium panelling is a new technology and a new material – one that was unknown in the high modernist period but which is becoming increasingly ubiquitous today. The fact that aluminium panelling is coloured during the manufacturing process opens a new and interesting question: is this colour inherent, or is it simply applied earlier in the building process? Is it, in other words, an ‘honest’ or a ‘dishonest’ colour? Given that aluminium does have its own colour, and that it can be lacquered or anodised to retain that colour, it seems that the aluminium panelling of the NMA have been received as ‘dishonest’.
conservative in their application in the National Museum', 37 Frith complains that the building is a major work of civic architecture which in the end is not ‘public’ at all, but manages to speak to only a tiny minority.

But why such tongue-lashings and breast-beatings over what has quickly established itself as a happy theme park to mediocrity? Surely its condoning of the ruthless kitsch of petty capitalism in its imagery and finishes provides for some spectre of merit? The problem becomes one of the civic domain in which architecture and its rhetoric is interpreted. For a supposedly public work, the museum is an intensely private building, privately encoded with in-jokes, and in the end hugely un-funny... The confection of cheap cladding and plasterboard is a spurious sideshow of magpie borrowings passing themselves off as cultural reference...38

Everything in this passage decries what Frith reads as the NMA's verisimilitude of popularity - the reference to theme-parks, sideshows, commercialism - a confection constructed with poor quality materials and finishes, which nevertheless flirts 'pretentiously' with the canon of modern architecture. To Frith the building reads not as a cheap and cheerful reflection of the Australian vernacular, but as a demeaning attempt to raise a laugh from the elite at the expense of the uncomprehending masses. Ultimately, Frith lamentingly wonders that '[s]urely the representation of our collective experience on such a beautiful site, and the potential for a shared account of our heritage with Australia's Aboriginal peoples, deserves more than the hollow laughter of architectural in-jokes and superficial mockery?39 His complaint is thus two-fold – that the building has insufficient gravitas, and that this is compounded rather than redeemed by the fact that it is not truly popular at all, but rather ‘intensely private’.

A different understanding of the NMA is evinced by John Macarthur, who, writing for Architecture Australia, conceives it as a work of architecture which forces the visitor into a ‘performance’ of citizenship, through the very act of deciphering the encoded meaning of the building. Not an architecture that speaks only to a

37 'The word conceit is appropriate to a fragmented architecture of private meanings, in-jokes, hollow rituals. A conceit can be both highly conservative and intentionally pretentious. The museum is positioned as high art using low art, a latter-day adaptation of the theories of the American architect Robert Venturi... These theories are now dated, tired and conservative in their application in the National Museum.' Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity',
38 Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity',
39 Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity',
minority, then, but one that is open to interpretation by all, whilst at the same time demanding a certain effort in explication. In his conception, the building is not popularly accessible in the sense of being ‘dumbed down’, but popular in that the populace is invited to make a guided reading of its formal architectural complexities.

There is a variety of opinion that sees this [the NMA’s] approach to design as mocking the client and lay visitor, because an architectural education is required to make the identifications and get the joke. However, in my experience, the public, when attending to a building as architecture, for example touring Parliament House, are perfectly happy for the building to require a guided reading. If anyone is being mocked by the architectural references it is architects who think that the meaning of buildings can be self-evident and exist without interpretation.\footnote{Macarthur, ‘Australian Baroque’, p. 56.}

These two critical appraisals of the NMA building both raise the question of its apparent populism, but take opposing positions as to its worth. It is interesting to note that Frith’s critique was written for the ‘popular’ press, or at least for a non-specialist, general audience. Macarthur’s piece, on the other hand, was written for the official publication of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, a specialist journal directed at practicing architects. To guess at the ways in which the different demands of these forums and their respective audiences affected the two critiques would be pure speculation. But it is curious that Frith’s polemical attack on the building is enacted primarily on the basis that it appears to be popularly accessible, but in fact is not popular enough. Macarthur’s account addresses populism as an adjunct to the question of architecture as representation, or more specifically of architectural experience and interpretation.

**THE MONUMENTAL AND THE ANTI-MONUMENTAL**

The title of Frith’s damning review is ‘A monument to lost opportunity’, and the NMA has been described by another detractor as ‘a monument to horrendous political correctness.’\footnote{Frith, ‘A monument to lost opportunity’, The Canberra Times, 20 March, 2001, Piers Akerman, 'Museum is an original imitation,' Sunday Telegraph, 8 April, 2001, p 97} These seem particularly interesting descriptions for a building that
was explicitly requested by its organising committee to be ‘anti-monumental’. At one level, the demand for an anti-monumental building would seem an extension of Paul Keating’s comments quoted at the beginning of the chapter – the desire to avoid another ‘marble mausoleum’. If monumentality is conceived as an undesirable characteristic, it is not hard to imagine what its attributes might be seen to be: salutary, impersonal, sober and officious, a bastion of institutional authority expressed in an architecture of unity and coherence. In opposition to this, the ‘anti-monumental’ would presumably be irreverent, informal and unconventional, perhaps expressed in a deliberately contemporary architecture that was low-rise, ‘incoherent’ and open to interpretation. This seems a fairly accurate general description of the NMA building. So while I may have rather overstated the opposition between the two, ‘deathly’ monumentality and ‘lively’ anti-monumentality seem to be the conceptions at play. What is really interesting about these two, however, is that one is ostensibly ‘popular’ and the other is not. Asking for an anti-monumental museum can be seen as a simple request for a ‘populist’ building - a deliberate counter to the general tone of the architecture of the national capital. In fact the museum is already known by some as the ‘enema’, and this seems an amusingly apt way of describing its treatment of the earnest and inhibited civic architecture of Canberra.

But given that this particular civic building is a museum, the idea of anti-monumentality is more revolutionary than it might appear. There is, I have argued,
a deep historical connection between museums and monumentality. Museum buildings have traditionally been monumental by definition, where 'monument' is used as an adjective for anything that is large, secure, and monolithic, appropriate to the storage of cultural 'treasures'. They have also been monumental in the sense of being a symbol of community - an expression of gathering, of the institutions that are central to the communal nature of society. So not only has museum architecture traditionally been conservative, historicist and generally funereal, but it has also manifest the most fundamental meaning of monumentality, one generally out of currency today - that of the monument as gravestone, commemoration for events past and people dead. Museum buildings have thus also been monumental in this older sense of having borne witness to passing time in a solid, durable, relatively unchanging form. The massive presence of the monument stands as a corrective and consolation, testifying to the endurance of culture in the face of human finitude and the annihilating effects of time. The museum building as monument also acts as counterpart and metonym for the objects within, artefacts that make past events present simply by their mute physical existence.

In light of this reading, then, the idea of a museum embodying anti-monumentality is curious indeed, since it necessitates a significant departure from the traditional role and function of the museum apparatus, as well as its expression in museum architecture. The idea of 'anti-monumentality' seems to set up a binary opposition between the traditional museum institution, represented as elitist, culturally irrelevant, and boring, and the brave new museum - popular, egalitarian, entertaining, relevant, and 'lively' in every sense of the word. While the former was traditionally represented in architecture by monumental historicist styles, the latter

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45 This position is also taken by Carol Duncan, who notes that the architecture of art museums prior to the 1950's was stylistically indebted to Greek classical temples. See Carol Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums, Routledge, London, pp 7-11.


seems to have shaken off the 'mausoleum' association, and is expressed in a
distinctively contemporary architecture, of which the NMA can be seen as an
exemplar. This trend towards the new, 'lively' museum model also shifts emphasis
from the inanimate museum object to the highly animated human subject, the
museum visitor. This is further manifest in the NMA, I would argue, in a de-
emphasis of the building's object character in favour of practice: both in the design
process and the actual experience of the museum visitor.

Of course, I am doubtless (and indeed deliberately) reading more into this
idea of anti-monumentality than was originally intended. For one thing, the NMA
building does retain some of the older nuances of monumentality - as a symbol of
community, here manifest in a 'vernacular' rather than an 'official' mode, but
especially the idea of the monument as gravestone.48 But the requirement for anti-
monumentality remains instructive, since it seems to encapsulate the ideology of
the museum, and to provide a direct link between the ideology of the museum
apparatus and that of the building itself. Much of the energy of the NMA as an
institution seems directed towards undoing the totalising expectations carried by
national institutions in general, and national museums in particular. It is
determinedly pluralist, offering many individual stories and narratives rather than an
overriding authoritative metanarrative of 'nationhood'. There is also little that is
grandiose in the architecture: in its messy vitality it works against false notions of
completion, unity, and wholeness. In its exhibition policy, the NMA abandons an
authoritative version of history in favour of multiple stories, of ordinary as well as
extraordinary people; and the nationalism embodied there is of the most diffident,
self-effacing type. Where a museum's contents are not only cultural 'treasures',
there is also less need for the 'museum as vault' typology, and the contents of the
NMA are decidedly mixed in this respect.49 Indeed, if a national museum is seen to

48 Peter Kohane finds that the museum 'has a monumentality rooted in, while critical of,
traditional forms and compositional strategies.' Peter Kohane, 'Review', Architectural Review,
vol 75, Autumn 2001, p 53.
49 In an article entitled 'Azaria's black dress view of Australian history', Stephen Brook makes
an enumeration of some of the NMA's 'popular culture' contents, beginning with Azaria
Chamberlain's infamous black dress. The article continues: 'The National Museum of
Australia also celebrates the everyday and include displays of Hills Hoists and Victa
lawnmowers. The story of captain Arthur Phillip gets equal billing to entertainers The
Wiggles.' The article continues a few lines later, without apparent irony, 'The museum
'house' the stories of the nation, there was good reason for the NMA to make allusions to domestic architecture, the architecture of the familiar, mundane, and everyday. This strategy is particularly clear in the relationship of the NMA building with its own 'backyard', the Garden of Australian Dreams.

**COLOUR AS THE SIGN OF A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

The contention with which I opened this chapter was that the NMA demonstrates an aesthetic of populism that exists quite independently of actual popularity, or even a relationship with popular culture, and that in doing so it presents and problematises the question of populism in formal architectural terms. In proving this, it is worthwhile to return for a moment to the question of colour – specifically the ways in which colour in architecture generally, and in museums in particular, has the connotation of flippancy, superfluity, and populism.

I have argued above that the reception of the NMA as populist could in fact be the symptom of a deeper reaction against its apparent frivolity, a frivolity signified most strongly by its colour. In this conception, and given that colour is strongly linked with populism, a highly coloured building is assumed to be ‘lowering’ itself in order to appeal to popular taste. In other words, the structure of the prohibition is such that it is never possible for bright colour on a building to be incidental – it is never unremarkable, nor indeed unremarked. Colour is inescapably associated with the flippant, the frivolous and, above all, the populist.

But I would argue that the NMA, turning the modernist prohibition on its head, uses colour as the deliberately frivolous disguise of a profoundly serious intent. Rather than concealing the absence of meaning, it conceals an overabundance of meaning – a despairing accumulation of piled up allegories, codes and fragments. It is thus deeply ironic that the NMA has been read as a light, flippant, and populist confection, since I would argue that it could hardly be further from those things. Rather than taking the usual path, of seeking cultural authority...
through allusion to traditional monumental architecture, the NMA makes perverse references to the seemingly trivial, commercial, and populist. The reasons why the architects might want the building to be (mis)read in this way are complex. But by renouncing the aesthetic trappings of a serious institution, the NMA reveals the very superficiality of such trappings. Furthermore, by renouncing the ‘look of authority’ in favour of colour, frivolity, and apparent populism, it introduces a note of doubt. Could the building, and thus the institution - a national museum, remember, charged with representing the nation and placed in the national capital - really be as flippant as it seems? Or is there some more subtle game afoot, a subversive questioning of accepted notions of Australian national history and national identity? I would argue that this latter is the case.

In the NMA, then, colour is the sign of a critical engagement. It positions the building itself as a discourse or discussion, not only of architectural colour as conferring inferiority and flippancy, but of neutrality as conferring authority and legitimacy. Of course, it is precisely because of architecture’s history of chromophobia that colour can itself become a tool for subversiveness, provide an invitation to alternative readings, and collapse unspoken hierarchies. In this respect, the colour in and of the NMA provides an emblem of that which has long been marginalised in architecture, and in culture more generally.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM AND THE NATIONAL WAR MEMORIAL

If the NMA seems at least ostensibly to be a ‘theme park’, there is another building in Canberra that seems to be a ‘mausoleum’ – the National War Memorial. The relationship between these two buildings is instructive to an understanding of the rhetoric and aesthetic of populism manifest in the NMA. For many years the War Memorial acted as a surrogate national museum, and some commentators have seen its existence as one reason for the long deferral of the NMA project.\(^5\) I would also contend that the purpose and programme of the NMA has been strongly conditioned by the presence of this predecessor, which already enshrines many of the most emotive threads of Australian history - the two world wars, and the

\(^5\) Anderson and Reeves, *Contested Identities*, pp 79-124.
CHAPTER SEVEN
Theme-Park or Mausoleum: ‘Black Armband’ Populism at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

FIGURE 17: Australian National War Memorial, Canberra.
corresponding ideas of sacrifice, hardiness and masculine heroism that frame mainstream Australian national identity. Where the memorial is solemn and monumental, the NMA is lively and anti-monumental – each appears to be everything the other is not. But I would further argue that the two institutions are more closely intertwined than they would appear, and that their relationship is not a dichotomy, but something closer to a dialectic.

There is a symmetry here that, perversely, proves my argument: the war memorial, the most literally funereal and mausoleum-like of all Canberra’s edifices, is extremely popular in the sense of being well subscribed and frequently visited by the public. The difference – and it is not a large difference – is that it doesn’t present that popularity as a spectacle. It would clearly be inappropriate if it also had the aesthetic trappings of popularity, amongst which I have already listed bright colour, figurative elements, and visual jokes. The crucial point here is that the prohibitions which would make it inappropriate for the War Memorial to pursue a populist aesthetic are precisely the same ones that used also to be applied to museums. The NMA building itself demonstrates that these are now under review, and that what the NMA committee was really requesting in its requirement for an anti-monumental building was one that looked popular, and which therefore redefined the institution away from the War Memorial model, and towards a brave new museum: popular, entertaining, and lively.

CONCLUSION
I have, by now, set up a whole series of binary oppositions: between high and low, elite and popular culture, the museum as entertainment and edification, monumental and anti-monumental, ‘lively’ and ‘deathly’ architecture, and vanguard and avant-garde approaches. This series threatens to expand interminably. But while up until now I have proceeded as though the oppositions were loosely synonymous, and gathered their terms under the sign of the ‘mausoleum’ and ‘theme park’ respectively, this in itself calls for further examination. There is not sufficient space here to make the necessary fine distinctions between them, but it must be said firstly that the terms of the oppositions are not entirely synonymous,
FIGURE 18: The Gallery of the First Australians at the NMA; and the Honour Roll at the Australian National War Memorial. Two modes of museum ‘死亡ness’.
and more importantly, that there is a convergence between the two ends of the spectrum. This, then, is the point: that the NMA manifests both sides of many of the oppositions I have mentioned, not, I would argue, in an attempt to resolve or smooth them over, but in order to problematise and render them explicit. This is proven by the fact that throughout the critical reception of the building, it has effectively been criticised simultaneously for being too popular and not popular enough. That these seem to be contradictory criticisms is itself an indication that the building challenges established notions of the place of architecture in civic life, and its expected comportment in relation to ‘the public’.

Ultimately, the only possible conclusion is that the building is complex enough to be read on a number of levels, it is both populist and elitist, literal and encoded, private and public, and it confounds traditional binary oppositions between these categories. A rather equivocal, textbook postmodernist type of conclusion, you might say. But I would argue that the very uncertainty and indeterminacy of the NMA building is an appropriate representation of problematics that already exist in the material – not only in definitions of Australian national identity, but the very idea of a national museum, a popular museum, and a popular museum building. That the architecture does not paper over these cracks but rather expresses them in formal architectural terms is a tribute to the courage of the architects, given that a less sympathetic reading would see this as a weakness inherent in the architecture, rather than in what it represents.

POSTSCRIPT: THE WINDSCHUTTLE AFFAIR

In September 2001, the conservative author and publisher Keith Windschuttle published a scathing attack on the NMA in the journal Quadrant, under the title ‘How not to run a museum’.\(^1\) In this article, he alleged that in its content, the museum was biased towards a politically-correct leftist orthodoxy, that it

concentrated inordinately on the accounts of ‘feminists, ethnics, indigenes and gays’, and that it was both unscholarly and simply wrong in some of its displays on Aboriginal frontier conflict.\textsuperscript{52} He also complained about the experience of the architecture, saying it was ‘both baffling and unnerving’, that the building was ‘unworkable’ and ‘full of cryptic symbols for the conference-going architectural cognoscenti, but … a very uncomfortable enclosure for the typical visitor, the poor mug taxpayer who has funded it all.’\textsuperscript{53} Significantly, Windschuttle kept his most strident criticism for the architecture of the First Australians Gallery, the plan of which ‘borrows’ or appropriates the footprint of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum. From this he draws the immediate conclusion that this ‘signifies that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust.’\textsuperscript{54}

Even before the publication of this review, Windschuttle had been at the centre of a smouldering controversy over his claim that there was never any widespread or systematic violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people following white settlement.\textsuperscript{55} Windschuttle had set about to attack the apparent ‘myth’ of Aboriginal history as one of violence and massacre, and also to dismantle what he regarded as the entrenched fabrications buried within ‘black armband’ history.\textsuperscript{56} Naturally this caused considerable debate, especially given Windschuttle’s personal attacks on some of the most well-known and respected historians in the country.\textsuperscript{57} It was brought to a head in December 2001, when the NMA organised

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{52} Windschuttle, ‘How Not to Run a Museum’, p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Windschuttle, ‘How Not to Run a Museum’, p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Windschuttle, ‘How Not to Run a Museum’, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{55} See for example his ‘The myths of frontier massacres in Australian history, Parts I, II, and III,’ \textit{Quadrant}, vol. 44, nos. 10-12, 2000, pp. 8-21, 17-24, 6-20.
\item \textsuperscript{56} As previously noted, the term ‘black armband history’ was coined by Geoffrey Blainey in a paper entitled ‘Drawing up a balance sheet of our history,’ \textit{Quadrant}, vol. 37, nos 7-8, 1993, p. 15. This note from Bain Attwood and SG Foster, ‘Introduction’, in \textit{Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience}, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, p. 28-29, footnote 39.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Most notably Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan. Since that time, the controversy has flared intermittently, and continues to smoulder in the features, editorials, and letters of the national press. For a good general overview – which also has an outsider’s objectivity that has been otherwise generally absent from the rather hysterical tone of the debate – see David Fickling, ‘One country, two histories,’ \textit{The Guardian}, Friday January 17, 2003. The coverage in the local press was extensive, but for a selection see Keith Windschuttle, ‘Why I’m a bad historian,’ \textit{The Australian}, Wednesday 12 February 2003, p. 13; Debra Jopson, ‘History in the remaking’, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, Tuesday 11 February, 2003, p. 9; Dirk Moses, ‘Rendering the past less unpalatable,’ \textit{The Australian}, Monday 13 January 2003, p. 9; Stephen Foster, ‘History can’t thrive on a diet of bare facts,’ \textit{The Australian}, Tuesday 11
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and convened a forum on ‘Frontier History’, which was attended by many of the protagonists from both sides of the debate – characterised as the ‘black armband’ and ‘white blindfold’ positions, respectively.\textsuperscript{58} The papers delivered at the forum were collected and published, including an article by Windschuttle entitled ‘Doctored evidence and invented incidents in Aboriginal historiography’.\textsuperscript{59} In this paper, Windschuttle again specifically criticises the NMA, along with its mode of historiography more generally, and also expands his earlier attack on its architecture.\textsuperscript{60} In fact, he uses the architecture of the NMA as a bracket, both opening and closing his polemic with references to the building itself. Towards the beginning, he writes:

When the National Museum of Australia was opened in 2001, it commemorated the genocide thesis [i.e. the idea that a ‘conscious, wilful’ genocide had been perpetrated on the Aboriginal people] in the very design of the building itself. Architect Howard Raggatt borrowed its central structure – shaped as a lightning bolt striking the land – from the Jewish

\textsuperscript{58} Attwood, Bain, and Foster, SG, eds., \textit{Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience}, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003. See in particular Attwood and Foster’s introduction, pp. 3-30, which provides an exemplary scholarly survey of the history of historiography in Australia, and thus places the present debate in historical context.


\textsuperscript{60} The controversy was raised again in December 2002 by the launch of Windschuttle’s book, \textit{The Fabrication of Aboriginal History}, the first of a proposed three volume set. See Keith Windschuttle, \textit{The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen’s Land 1803-1847}, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.
Museum in Berlin, signifying that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{61}

Aside from the erroneous identification of the Jewish museum’s footprint as a ‘lightning bolt’, and the debateable identification of this as the ‘central structure’ of the museum, Windschuttle is correct – there can be no doubt that this association was a deliberate statement made by the architects. The sense of melancholy, apology and atonement is everywhere evident in the architecture of the museum.\textsuperscript{62} Interestingly, Windschuttle then goes on to exonerate design architect Howard Raggatt for making the connection between Aboriginal history and genocide, implying that he, along with other non-historians, has been fooled into buying the ‘lie’ of black armband history. Even so, for Windschuttle the architectural reference has to go, and he concludes his paper with ‘recommendations’

Let me finish with some recommendations to the National Museum’s Council about the construction of the building itself. I would advise the Council to reconstruct that part of the building that provides the lightning bolt symbol. This would remove the current connection between the fate of the Aborigines and the fate of the Jews of Europe. The Aborigines did not suffer a holocaust. To compare the policies towards Aborigines of Governor Arthur Phillip or Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, or any of their successors, with those of Adolf Hitler towards the Jews, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic. ... For the Australian Government to construct a permanent, national structure that advertises such a grotesque historical misinterpretation is an insult to the nation and to all its members, white and black. It is a monument to nothing more than the politically motivated allegations of one particular school of historiography whose former dominance of the field is now visibly eroding.\textsuperscript{63}

The debate, and with it broader questions of truth in Australian history and historiography, and its implications for national identity and reconciliation, is ongoing. But while these discussions have been fascinating, and indeed while they demonstrate the continuing relevance of the present study, what is most relevant

\textsuperscript{61} Windschuttle, ‘Doctored evidence and invented incidents…’, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{62} The question of whether the architects also informed or consulted the Museum board on these matters prior to the building’s construction is another matter, and this opens some interesting ethical problems. Windschuttle himself quotes Dawn Casey, the NMA’s first director, as saying ‘We endorsed the plans as a whole for their imaginative and creative solution to the task at hand. Hindsight is a fine thing and, had we known, we may well have asked for that particular reference not to be included.’ Windschuttle does not name his source, but see his ‘How not to run a museum’, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{63} Windschuttle, ‘Doctored evidence and invented incidents’, p. 110.
here is to point out the central role that architecture took in the debate. The NMA building itself actually participates in public discourse – it has a political position and a high level of critical engagement. And while Windschuttle’s passage contains the implicit belief that architecture should keep to its own domain, and stay away from the business of historiography, this runs against the actual trend. Museum architecture is increasingly encroaching upon the territory of exhibition design and object display, just as it is an increasingly direct expression of museological strategy. While the architecture of the NMA remains an extreme example, it is also emblematic of the critical engagement of contemporary museums, their direct participation in public discourse.

Ultimately, as Richard Yallop has noted, the question of criticality is central. Even before the NMA opened there was a fierce debate over the wording of its exhibition guidelines - should the museum ‘challenge’ its visitors to ponder and reflect on the nation’s past, or should it ‘invite’ them to do so? This can be put another way – should the museum be critical itself, or should it merely leave space for the visitor to be critical? The very fact that the museum has actively sought a range of viewpoints, and provided the forum for some brutal criticisms directed at itself, indicates that it is engaged in the thick of critical discourse, not simply observing and recording from afar. The fact that this debate also happens in and through built form is an indication of the increased role of museum architecture in the operation, as well as the representation and facilitation, of museum work.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion: The Art of the Architecture of Museums

Given the horrors perpetuated by the so-called ‘advanced’ nations in this century, beautiful art risks irrelevance – embalment in museums, the mausoleums of culture. In consequence, modern art falls victim to the following debilitating antinomy: if, on the one hand, it fetishizes its autonomy, it remains open to the criticism of privilege and aloofness vis-à-vis the condition of unfreedom that afflicts society as a whole; on the other hand, if it should renounce its autonomy and instead seek immanence, it finds itself implicated in a web of heteronomous, functional relations – a regression to cult. This is the labour of Sisyphus confronting modernism, art after the fall from naivete. It must remain far enough removed from the fray to prevent itself from being swallowed up by it, yet at the same time close enough to keep from appearing frivolous and self-indulgent in grave times.¹

Richard Wolin

Artworks were always meant to endure; it is related to their concept, that of objectivation. Through duration art protests against death; the paradoxically transient eternity of artworks is the allegory of an eternity bare of semblance. Art is the semblance of what is beyond death’s reach.²

Theodor Adorno

FIGURE 19: Jewish Museum (above); Guggenheim Museum (below). Art Museums and Impossible History Museums; the art of architecture as conspicuous uselessness.
At the opening of the preface, at the very beginning of this dissertation, I proposed that the discourse and practice of architecture provides a particularly appropriate aperture through which to approach the state of the museum in the postmodern age. The institution has long been simultaneously bounded and defined by its architectural carapace, both represented and restrained by its walls. But the preface also argued that as long as the museum has existed in its modern form, so has museum criticism. And if architecture provides a metaphor for the institution itself, it also provides one for the consistent project of museum criticism, which has aimed at ‘ruining’ the museum, breaking down its power structures and ideological exclusions along with its walls, and thereby reuniting the objects incarcerated within with life, in the present moment, in the world.

This ‘positive’ ruination has been manifest in the museum’s increased openness and accessibility, and the greater transparency of its structures of power and control. As the museum’s mechanisms for the maintenance of hegemony have progressively crumbled under the sustained assault of postmodern ideological and museological critique, so the barriers that have long excluded certain marginalised people and narratives have also begun to fall. This project has been a valuable one indeed, and it has been argued that its hard-won gains should not be lightly renounced. But does the general shift towards a rhetoric of liveliness, which has been argued here to be an explicit disavowal of the museum’s immanent connection with mortality, also signal an institution that has lost its way, and lost sight of its own possibilities? More than this, does the shift necessarily imply the dematerialisation of museum architecture?

A wall encloses, defines and protects as well as excluding, and the general trajectory of the thesis has been that with the breaching of the museum’s walls there has also been something lost, something that has neither been generally acknowledged nor closely examined in the contemporary literature. For one thing, the new ideal of transparency and boundlessness in the museum – its hoped-for spatial and temporal continuity with the everyday world – allows the uninterrupted flow of people, commerce, technology, information, and interpretation, but also seems to have heralded the dissipation, or at least the de-emphasis, of the museum object. More than this, the deathliness that this dissertation has argued to be irreducible from the museum has been comprehensively and actively denied. It
has been argued that those contemporary museum critics who have been unable to see the redemptive aspects of the museum’s deathliness have also missed one of its principal claims for utility and value in society.

The argument has followed, then, that if the museum is to have social significance beyond simple entertainment and uncritical didacticism, and if it is to have any political engagement independent of its entwinement with the culture industry, then it must also retain a certain deathliness. The necessary distance between the museum and the world also marks out the gap between presentation and representation; if there was no such gap, then the museum’s status as a mediation, and its transformation of objects as they pass over its threshold, would be lost. It is precisely the museum’s alienation from the world, its own specific variant on autonomy, from which its social significance derives. In these terms the museum’s mausoleum character is both its blessing and its curse. If its distance is collapsed, its autonomy subjugated, its indeterminacy subjected to specific ends, and the institution generally integrated with life, then it would no longer be able to sustain a critical stance. It is the very deathliness of the museum that gives it a crucial value in commentating upon the world.

Much of the thesis has been engaged with pointing out the crucial significance that this quality has necessarily taken on at the particular historical juncture where various factors have conspired to drive it out of museums altogether. Even though the museum’s deathly functions – as a modern form of vanitas or momento mori, as a means of mourning the death of both culture and the individual before the fact, as the mortification and thus contextual re-framing of objects, and indeed as the materialisation and mortification of culture itself – could be argued not to be central to the institution, or even to be marginal or peripheral, it is precisely because these functions are irreducible that they serve as a limit condition. They become central only when they are refused. They are also intensified in that very specific genre of museum where such refusal is not possible, and consequently where the irrational, repressed and autonomous functions of the broader institution are collected and concentrated.

This has been argued through both of the case studies, but it is particularly emblematised in one aspect of the Jewish Museum. If this, of all museums, can be seen as a kind of constructed ruin, then there is one other aspect of the building
CHAPTER EIGHT
Conclusion: The Art of the Architecture of Museums

Above: Staff entry to the museum – the only external door, not accessible to the public

FIGURE 20: The Jewish Museum as ‘Museum Without Doors’
which demonstrates that this need not necessarily result in an increased physical and conceptual contiguity with the world. This is the fact that on ground level, from the outside, it is simply not possible to directly enter the building. The visitor must enter the building next door, descend a tunnel-like staircase, and then ascend again into the volume of the museum. In this actual, physical isolation between the interior space of the museum and the space of the world outside – where the sun shines, people walk and drive by, life continues oblivious – could be the perfect emblem of the idea of the museum as mausoleum. It is certainly possible to see both the NMA and the Jewish Museum as constructed ruins, but in the latter case it is emphatically not because its walls have been broken down – in fact this museum could hardly be less permeable to the world. Rather the museum, through its architecture, retains a certain formal alienation. Rather than a ‘museum without walls’, it is all wall. More than this, it is a museum without doors.

The building abandons even the most fundamental ideas about how architecture should act as easy interface between interior and exterior space, the building and the city. It intrudes upon and obstructs, in the most blunt physical way possible, the free flow of movement between the museum and the world. But while the circuitous entry to the museum has often been noted, it has never, to my knowledge, been condemned. In fact, the very difficulty of this entrance, the very isolation between interior and exterior, has been taken as proof of the appropriate autonomy of the architecture. In a commission like this one, so the logic seems to run, it is not only acceptable but also appropriate to make such deliberately and conspicuously dis-functional design moves. Along with the conspicuous emptiness of the museum’s void spaces, this constitutes its claim to be read as art: as ‘labour not tethered to any extrinsic goal’ in Horowitz’s words, as discussed in chapter five, and I will return to this shortly.

The question of monumentality has been shown throughout the thesis to be a specific problem for museum architecture. The monument is simultaneously the most artefactual and least determined of architectural constructions. In its purest form, the monument is ‘useless’ – it has no actual function at all, other than pointing to the passage of time. The consistent problematisation and disavowal of monumentality in new museums reveals its very significance. This is surely a result, in part, of the monument’s emblematisation of the deathly aspects of the
museum institution, aspects that are also particular to the object character of the monument, and its projection of a particular phenomenal experience and affect for the beholder. But more than all of this a monumental museum architecture is a materialisation of the broader alienation of the institution from empirical reality. A monumental architecture, in its fabric and in its idea, erects a tangible barrier between the space of the museum and the space of the world.

Of course, it would be neither interesting nor productive to enact a simple reversal of the liveliness / deathliness hierarchy, whilst preserving the same old dichotomy. Current museum criticism may repudiate the museum’s mausoleum character, but to simply turn this repudiation on its head again would be a regressive step. And neither is this dissertation advocating the redefinition of the institution as an instrument for some kind of obsessive metaphysical death cult. What has been interesting and worthwhile here is the attempt to reconfigure what has been conceived as a dichotomy into something more complex and mutually inherent. And analysis of the two case study museums has done precisely that – locating both liveliness and deathliness, subjective affect and objective critique, openness and alienation within their museological strategies, and more significantly in their architecture.

**EMPTY VESSELS, RUINED OBJECTS**

In the preceding chapters, I have made two overriding arguments about the two case study museums. I have approached the Jewish Museum as a ‘constructed ruin’, an object deeply invested with allegorical meaning, which interacts with its beholders by inviting interpretation and provoking affect. I have approached the National Museum of Australia through the concept of the popular, drawing a distinction between ‘popularity’ and ‘populism’, and arguing that the NMA’s apparently facile populist elements are in fact a cover for a series of much more risky contentions about Australian history.

But while there seems a vast distance between these two arguments, and indeed between these two museums, certain openings and correlations revealed throughout the case study chapters hint at much more significant correspondences. I would argue that, in fact, the two museums can be seen as closely interrelated.
FIGURE 21: Two empty vessels: Internal space in the Jewish Museum (above) and NMA (Great Hall shown under construction, below).
Specifically, each argument is applicable to both museums – the NMA can also be understood as a built ruin (in this case more in the mode of a cast around absence), encoded and layered with significant fragments of meaning, and actively inviting allegorical interpretation. Likewise, the Jewish Museum has proven extremely ‘popular’ in the sense that it has attracted many visitors, even, as already noted, in the period before it exhibited any objects at all. While the Jewish Museum is far from being ‘populist’ in the sense of deliberately courting popular success through bright colour and the promise of fun, it is in the same seemingly contradictory position as I have argued for the Australian National War Memorial, of being popularly tragic. And it is here that the relationship between the two museums becomes most pointed.

The significance of the two very different modes – allegory and populism, melancholy and fun, deathliness and liveliness - is each most truly revealed at the moment when it goes too far, and the couplets begin to converge. The NMA, in particular, can be conceived as a mourning play equally joyful and despairing, an ecstatically debauched wake. In the face of the nebulous, contested, impossible narratives and questions that the museum addresses, culture will always fall short; architecture will never be enough, representation will always be out of reach. What the NMA demonstrates is that, in such circumstances, a seemingly glib jollity is as good an answer as gravitas. In this delirious danse macabre, solemnity and tragedy collide with populism, and in their mingling each is both questioned and affirmed.

The NMA building represents the explicit politicisation of museum architecture, and its possibilities as a literal and figurative, as well as an abstract, form of representation. The critical potential of museums in general, and museum architecture in particular, is revealed there, just as it is tested to its subversive limit. The architecture is certainly conceived as high art, but this art exists in the architectural idea, the process, and the inhabitation, and not necessarily in the material object. Indeed, the fact that architecture is at times deliberately clumsy, incoherent, and a-formal, reveals the architectural object as hollowed out and mortified, only to be animated by the presence and passage of its visitors.

Both buildings can be understood as constructed ruins; as buildings, but more specifically museums, always already ruined by the catastrophic events they
set out to represent. Allegory – as a process and a practice, a method of ‘ruining’ the ‘Schoene schein’ or beautiful semblance of wholeness and harmony, characteristic of affirmative culture – thus provides a critical tool for understanding both the object and the experience of each museum, in both its material and ideational modes. Both of the museums are centred upon absence and loss as such, and each employs some form of aesthetic affect in order to provoke an individual engagement between the experiencing museum subject and particular, difficult historical narratives. Both also rely on a certain level of interactivity between an artwork and a beholder to enact their commemorative function. The differences between the mode of art in the two museums should not be overlooked, and the nature and character of the events they seek to represent are also different. But as I have argued throughout, these histories can be linked, even in their difference and specificity, by their very unpresentability. The fact that the architecture of the NMA alludes explicitly to the Jewish Museum, by ‘quoting’ its plan in the footprint of the Gallery of the First Australians, is proof that the architects clearly also saw such a direct link.

In its refusal of a happy semblance of harmony, the NMA can be taken as an exemplar of a melancholy, ‘black armband’ mode of historiography, and I have noted this through the attacks on the museum by Keith Windschuttle. There is one other element to Windschuttle’s argument that has wider significance and should be reiterated here, namely the fact that he objects to the message being transmitted through the medium of architecture. One might say that he objects to its being *formalised* – both in the sense of its being made permanent and part of a national institution, but also in the sense of its being rendered and represented in architectural form.

The key point here is that Windschuttle calls for that part of the building to be demolished; later to be reconstructed along some other, less politicised lines. He requests, in other words, that the building be ruined. But what he fails to perceive is that such ruination already lies at the centre of the NMA’s concept and objectivation. Windschuttle’s call for the demolition of the building, then, is deeply revealing of his own inability to see it as already ruined, as much as the poignant expression of the building’s immanent ruin as itself the expression of an impossible
desire to undo the past. Despite himself, Windschuttle has opened a *mise en abyme* of history as catastrophe, the allegory of which is the ruined object.

This follows directly from the discussion in chapter five, through Adorno, of the ability of art and architecture to incorporate disaster, the negative image of catastrophe being the only possible manifestation of utopia in the world. The NMA can be seen, in Adorno’s specific terms, as precisely ‘the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential, … as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image.\(^3\)

In many respects, then, this brings the thesis full circle – returning to ideas of the deathliness of the museum object, and the museum as the mortification of culture, articulated in the first chapters. It also sheds light on the present more general swing from deathliness to liveliness in museums, but offers a way beyond this dichotomy into a more rich, more ‘democratic’, and certainly more critical role for the museum in society.

Both of the museums examined here are ‘lively’ in the sense that they have a marked emphasis on the subjective experience of the museum visitor. This is manifest both in their deliberate employment of affect, and in their allegorical character – they demand interaction by demanding to be deciphered. They are both, to an extent, educational, they materialise culture and citizenship, they act as tourist attractions, and they exhibit aspects of popular culture (in the sense of the culture of the people). It must be said that both museums are also, at some obscure level, entertaining. These characteristics have all been previously identified as fundamental to the new, lively museum. Most significantly, however, each of the museums is deeply politically informed by the actions of the new museology – they are ‘open’ museums in the sense of presenting multiple narratives, and in the sense of working actively to attract and represent those groups who have traditionally been excluded and marginalised by museums.

In all of these terms, then, the two case study museums have taken on aspects of the shift towards a more general ‘liveliness’, and in ways that could be argued to be right and good. The fact that they equally retain a certain deathliness

\(^3\) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 33.
FIGURE 22: The writing of the walls: unfolded elevations of the Jewish Museum (above) and NMA (below). Two allegorical museums ‘piling up fragments ceaselessly, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle’. Image sources: El Croquis, vol 80, 1996, p. 65 (above) and Architecture Australia, vol 90, no 2, March/April 2001, p. 54 (below).
– at the level of content, obviously, but also in the presence and framing of museum objects as fragments, remnants, and traces, and more importantly in the critical and analytical stance that they take upon the material they present – only serves to make them more significant. And what is doubly interesting about these museums is the way in which deathliness has been manifest so strongly at the level of architecture.

These buildings embody a certain critical distance, an estrangement from the everyday, they foreground their own constructedness and status as representations. The institution's traditional pretence of presenting a pure and unmediated truth is thus abandoned, indeed actively undermined, and a gap opened between presentation and representation. Rather than attempting to reconcile life with art, the real world with museum space, such an approach retains the split between the two, and re-values it as the space that makes critical autonomy possible. The crucial difference between the traditional museum approach, and the museums under examination here, is that these are critical museums: they take a stance in relation to that which they represent. The space between presentation and representation, museum and life, thus necessarily has a mortifying effect, it necessarily decontextualises objects in order to then recontextualise them into a new meaning in the museum.

So these works of museum art and architecture are allegorical in the sense that they are politically engaged, site specific, and explicitly 'constructed'. They are also pledged, hopelessly, to the material world. All this is to say that they have a double existence – they are both art and artefact, specific and universal, engaged and autonomous. It is important that they are objects and are experienced as such. They do not seek to subordinate their own object character – in their emphasis on phenomenal, aesthetic, bodily experience, their monumentality and affect, and their mortification of the architectural object, its very hollowness. Each moves away from a polarity between a timeless, placeless, 'high' autonomous art, and a temporally and spatially specific, 'theatrical' art. It is, instead, an art that has a commemorative and representational function, which engages with the world whilst still retaining a level of universality.
FIGURE 23: The ‘Alphabet’ or ‘formal vocabulary’ of the Jewish Museum, as illustrated in the winning competition entry (above). Allegory of ‘tangled destinies’ at the NMA (below). Image sources: El Croquis, vol 80, 1996, p. 6 (above) and Architecture Australia, vol 90, no 2, March/April 2001, p. 54 (below).
It may seem as though, up until this point, I have largely concentrated on the rhetoric of these museum buildings, and their place in a wider cultural and theoretical context, at the expense of examining them aesthetically – as artworks in themselves. But in fact I would argue that implicit to my treatment and conception of these buildings throughout has been the idea, not only that they are serious and significant works of art, but that they are also good. To state it explicitly, the two buildings are not only important, interesting, and culturally significant, but my treatment of them here has been a kind of honorific, a critical commentary made possible by their very richness and quality. It has only been possible to treat them in the way that I have because their value as artworks is in their imminent logic. But there are also matters of their relation to architecture as a discipline that must also be mentioned briefly here. The two buildings are also located stylistically and historically, as part of a specific architectural tradition.

Both of the buildings emerge from a particular late modern or deconstructive phase of architecture, which is characterised by a specifically anti-aesthetic sensibility. Buildings in this mode strive for interpretation over sensation, they reveal an historical shift from the aesthetic to the rhetorical. This anti-formalist or a-formalist approach conceives art as the result of procedural, arbitrary operations, an approach that directly opposes and critiques ideas of ‘creation’, inspiration, and genius. The Jewish Museum is a potent exemplar of the ‘deconstructive’ strand of this tradition, while the NMA is a paradigmatic example of its counterpart, in historicist, stylistic, appropriative architectural ‘postmodernism’. Given this shared genealogy, it is all the more interesting that the two buildings are so different in their mode of being art.

The Jewish Museum building is, almost in spite of itself, a beautiful object. Derived from ‘texts’ outside of architecture, cut and slashed and ‘ruined’ in all the classically ‘deconstructive’ ways I have discussed, it nevertheless maintains a formal coherence. It is solemn, tragic, and affecting, and interacts with its beholders through the traditional, even ancient mode of allegory. The NMA, on the other hand, could never be described as beautiful. Its jarring, clunky composition, its disjunctions and incoherences, are as deliberate as they are conspicuous, and its apparently glib, flippant populism is both the method and sign of a deeper critical engagement. The populism of the NMA has been widely misunderstood as being
designed to evoke a facile aesthetic response, both to be and to provoke a sensation. While I have already discussed at length the actual complexities and subterfuges underlying this, the important point here is that if this museum can, at some level, be understood as aesthetic in the purely sensory implication of the term, the Jewish Museum can be understood as aesthetic in the sense of being a high-cultural, coherent formalist object. They are both ‘aesthetic’, but in very different ways. And it is when they are conceived as a dialectic that their relationship becomes most interesting.

There is no question that the architecture of both the Jewish Museum and the NMA is conceived of and enacted as a work of high art, and the fact that these museum buildings are works of art is crucial in holding the positive and negative moments of their dialectic together. The fact that architecture can never be truly autonomous, that it can never be free of explicit functional and economic considerations, and implicit social and political ones, means that it will always be both artwork and artefact, form and contents, container and contained. It has a unique objecthood and artefactuality that binds it with empirical reality, whilst transforming and critically reviewing that reality in a new way. As Adorno put it, ‘[b]y avoiding contamination from what simply is, art expresses it all the more inexorably’, and it is precisely because architecture has a physical presence and will always be an object, because it has duration and also endurance, because it transforms the prosaic material of the world into something more, because it is artificial in every sense of the word, and because it is also an art: for all of these reasons it can encompass this complex role. Both the art and the objecthood of museum architecture can serve, I would argue, to anchor the criticism, alienation, and deathliness inherent to the institution.

And it is here that the vexed question of architectural monumentality emerges again. The monument is the closest that architecture ever comes to autonomy. It stands, both physically and metaphorically, for its own separation from empirical reality. This can be perceived as a negative characteristic – of a building that holds itself apart, that subscribes to the old hierarchies of high and popular

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culture. But it is a trap to think that a monumental architecture that is formalist, concerned with its own status as art, must necessarily also be elitist. And if, as this thesis has argued throughout, there is a value in the museum’s deathliness, then the monumentality of museum architecture is deeply appropriate. It is precisely this existence as a material thing that lends the monument its profound affect, its special subject / object relationship. The phenomenological experience of architecture is also an expression of the ineffable passing of time, and ultimately also the transience of human life. The monumentality of architecture is thus clearly related to its artefactuality or object character, and the monumentality of museums is related both to the object character of the building, and to the fact that it houses objects.

The thesis throughout this dissertation has been that objects are the essential contents of museums, and that the deathliness of the institution derives directly and indirectly from the presence of objects. It has been argued that many museums, these days, do not foreground objects and collections as their raison d’être. But in the case of the two case study museums here this lack, or problematisation, takes on a different significance. I would argue that the specific historical circumstances of these two museums mean that in each case the object character of the architecture takes over from, even overcompensates, for the lack of a significant collection. In this, they are exemplars of the genre of social history museum within which I have located them. The artefacts and collection of a social history museum, by definition, can never be ‘significant’ in the sense of being rare, irreplaceable, or unique, because their very task is to evidence the mundane. Such objects will always be reflections and materialisations of the quotidian. One might say that the collections of a social history museum will always and necessarily be trivial, and that this illustrates their value – their power is derived precisely from their ubiquity, from their being drawn from the everyday life of everyday people, rather than their rareness and singularity.

The difference in the museums examined here is that as well as being social history museums, they also have elements of ‘impossibility’, in the way that I have earlier defined. The character of the events, narratives, and problems which they represent are too loaded, too significant, to be adequately borne or represented solely by quotidian artefacts. The value in examining such social
history museums that exist at the edge of the museum’s capability is not only that they reveal much about the museum’s role in the representation and commemoration of difficult historical narratives, but also that they reveal important new elements in the debate about objects in and of museums. They are museums (relatively) without objects, which nevertheless affirm the primacy of objects for museums. They demonstrate that even in those cases where the artefact is lost, impossibly contested, or inadequate, objects remain necessary and central to museum representation. It is precisely at the moment when the artefact is defeated that its place can and must be taken by art, including the art of architecture.

Both of the museums examined here rely on art as an integral part of the museological frame, indeed as the museological frame, and employs it to ‘stand in’ for absent historical evidence, people, and events. The role of art in these museums is not to represent history in a literal or evidential way, but rather to stands in for absence as such – representing the very unrepresentability of certain histories. This is possible precisely because of art’s freedom from specific functional use, and from specific determined meaning. It is possible because of art’s existence in the space of representation, because, in other words, of its autonomy. At the same time, the appearance of any building as conspicuously more than just a functional carapace, its appearing conspicuously ‘useless’, is the sign of a dedication to its own, autonomous determinations. A museum building that manifests a level of artifice that is excess to a simple means-end relationship would thus be staking a claim for autonomy, not just for the building, but for the institution.

These works of museum architecture can be seen, then, as the new ‘museum pieces’ as discussed in chapter four, but museum pieces reinvented as critical objects, dissonant and disruptive to the very idea of museums. Rather than attempting to escape their mausoleum character, these two museums recognise its inevitability, and compound their own deathliness through incorporation. In these cases the mausoleum association of the museum is no longer simply a characteristic of museum space or of museum objects – it is immanent in both the content of their form and the form of their content. The scar and the rupture have been drawn inwards, incorporated in both the art and the object; these museums
FIGURE 24: Two modes of monumentality: the cross motif as memento mori at the NMA (above) and Jewish Museum (below).
take the ‘catastrophes’ of the twentieth century into their very material. Their critical stance is manifest both internally, in their status as built ruins, and externally, in their comportment in relation to the world. They can be taken as architectural manifestations of Adorno’s conception of the sacrificial role of art, its renunciation of the world and incorporation of disaster as the only means of retaining and materialising the hope of future utopia.

This relates to the particular nature of the events that both of the case study museums stand in for. There is a persuasive argument that squabbling over such trifles as the cost of such a building, or its functionality, in the face of such tragedy would be wrong. The events that these museums commemorate would thus lend a certain autonomy to their architect, who would not only be free, but even obliged to distinguish this from other, more prosaic constructions. All of this is simply another way of saying that there is an important stake in these buildings being, and presenting themselves as, high art; as having a certain inbuilt ‘uselessness’, indeterminacy, autonomy, lack of instrumentality, and pursuit of higher things. In light of all of these findings, both architecture and ruin, as analogies for the present state of the museum, are revealed to be even more appropriate than first proposed.

ART MUSEUMS AND IMPOSSIBLE HISTORY MUSEUMS
There is a parallel here between the architecture of the impossible history museums examined in this dissertation, and the architecture of art museums. The thesis has already discussed the common mythology of art museums, that they require a building that is both lavish and conspicuously ‘artful’, to represent and exalt the works within. If art is thought to exist in a privileged realm ‘above’ the petty transactions of the everyday, then the idea that an art museum building should do the same, and indeed that it should ‘transcend’ other types of architecture, is a logical extension which is manifest in the self-conscious, theatrical ‘artiness’ of many recent purpose-built art museums.

The architecture of art museums, then, tends to be formally inventive, conspicuously ‘original’ and self-contained in its appearance. It projects an idea of having pursued its own formal and aesthetic concerns simultaneously with, if not
prior to, a functional purpose. But if, in an art museum, that excess is read as an homage to art, what does it mean if the architecture of impossible history museums is equally conspicuous in its artfulness? In architectural terms, the impossible history museum must be understood as the converse of the art museum – a sacrifice, penance, or atonement for humanity’s lowest deeds.

While art embodies or epitomises the best and 'highest' aspects of humanity, impossible histories epitomise the darkest and most tragic. The two are locked together on a scale: respectively positive and negative, but nevertheless intertwined. Art museums and impossible history museums are both spaces dedicated to extremes, and the similarities between their architectures are many - in their status as forms of ‘free labour’, their monumentality, their formal expressiveness, and their representation of the sacral, exceptional, and 'autonomous' nature of their contents.

Given all of this, it is not going too far to propose that both of these museum types have been indirectly produced by the increasingly rationalised and instrumental role of other museum types. If art museums deliberately retain much of their traditional 'disinterest' in the everyday transactions of the world, then it is also plausible to see the impossible history museum in this light. Its purpose is not only to represent history, but perhaps more importantly to provide a 'non-purposive' monument and memorial to loss and absence as such. The architecture of impossible history museums, then, is particularly interesting and important both because of its memorial or monumental function, and because it offers a certain licence for architectural 'expressionism' which is usually reserved for art museums. Both types represent their own excessiveness in their architecture. To put this in another way, their art is excess to their function, their content is excess to their form. They are excessive in the sense that they go beyond function, they make it clear that function is not their only, or indeed their primary concern. In the expression of all these things, their representational purpose is stronger than their instrumental one.

Impossible history museums are not without a function – they stand as a corrective, memorial, and admonition, and they also undoubtedly act as a means for the extirpation of guilt. But to say that they have a function is not to say they have a product. Indeed it might be said that the ‘unproductiveness’ of such
museums is important to both their conception and their reception – they must appear to be not instrumental, in order to retain their character as an apology, or more particularly as a penance. While these institutions clearly have an educational function, this is learning that is not ‘productive’ in the sense that it can not be put to a specific end. Such an ‘education’ about past tragedies comes closer to the quintessentially unproductive act of bearing witness. It is for this reason that their architecture can, and indeed must appear to be aesthetically autonomous, in the sense that it pursues architecture as an art more than a simple deterministic function. Art, as excess to function, is the allegory of autonomy. And this brings us to the heart of the matter – the art, autonomy and unproductiveness of such museums is both a sacrifice and a penance, a gift and an atonement. Deathliness is to museums as autonomy is to art. But museums can also achieve a kind of autonomy of their own, through the monumental, deathly art of their architecture.

CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM

Architecture manages and mediates the connection between the realm of the museum and the rest of the world, and it does this through the further intermediation of art. Architecture controls the museum’s comportment in relation to society, along with its social utility. And it is precisely museum architecture as itself art, its very form representing the transformation of the matter of the world, that this physical act of simultaneous separation and joining finds an ideological counterpart – it is the artefactuality of art that anchors it in empirical reality. It is both the art and the objecthood of museum architecture that is crucial in simultaneously separating it from and linking it to the world. In these terms, a museum without walls would be no museum at all: museum architecture does not simply encase the museum apparatus, it embodies it. The actual physical presence of architecture, its objecthood, remains crucially significant in allowing it to bear witness to, criticise, and offer a utopian alternative to the unreconciled state of the world.

This, then, would be an argument for a museum with walls, not because the institution should maintain its exclusionary or elitist structures, but because it is only by maintaining a certain alienation from empirical reality that the museum can take a critical stance upon it. This is not a dichotomous situation – it is not a case of
having to choose the world or the museum, life or death: it is precisely through museum architecture that a dialectical relationship can be realised. The artefactuality of architecture, its inescapable presence in the world, both anchors the museum in reality and separates it from that reality. Thus architecture can be seen to take a crucial role – it is literally the museum’s walls that simultaneously separate it from and connect it to the world. Architecture is both art and object – always already embodying a kind of reconciliation between art and life, harboured in its very material. Embedded in the specificities of time and place, as well as the contingencies of the social, political, and economic realms, it is the unresolved dialectical tension that architecture maintains, between art and artefactuality, uselessness and functionality, aesthetic and historical truth, presence and presentness, that is its great claim to significance, even to profundity.

The very ambiguity of architecture, its status as both artwork and artefact, with objecthood and also a certain autonomy, has been argued throughout this dissertation to anchor the negative but necessary alienation of the museum institution from empirical reality, the very deathliness from which its principal social utility derives. These museums demonstrate that it is still viable to have an institution that contains and requires objects – albeit artworks as well as artefacts. The artwork as such can not be represented – it must present itself. It is thus both indispensable and not substitutable. The artful appearance of architecture in social history museums thus brings the larger argument full circle. Its presence has the potential to act as a bulwark against the disappearance of objects, of all categories, from museums altogether.
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