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The Museum--A Refuge for Utopian Thought

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

A history of museums could be written that would reveal the museum to be a series of utopian projects. It is the capacity to imagine a world in a particular key that distinguishes the utopian imagination, no matter what the medium of expression. While utopia in the strict sense of the word is a literary genre--Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is the *locus classicus*--the utopian imagination is by no means confined to what can be expressed in writing. How do museums engage the utopian imagination and how do their methods differ from those of literary utopias? The museum is at once an architectural form, a concrete environment for reflection, a reservoir of tangibilities, a school for the senses, a space of conviviality, an autopoietic system, and a projection of the ideal society, notwithstanding the amply documented tensions between the utopian ideal of the museum and its instrumentalizations.

Both literary utopias and museums are engaged in worldmaking. They engage the imagination in the possibility of a complete and perfect universe. During the Renaissance, both utopia and museum were imagined as circular, set apart, and ordered: utopia was an ideally governed island, the ideal museum was a domed rotunda on a mountaintop.¹ When envisioned in terms of its collection, the ideal museum was a Noah's Ark, with a complete set of specimens providing the entire DNA needed to regenerate the world in its entirety, or a Temple of Solomon, imagined as a miniature world, a complete archive of knowledge, and a treasure house.

While all utopian worlds are built out of other worlds, only better, the museum literally takes the world apart at its joints, collects the pieces, and holds them in suspension. Identified, classified, and arranged, objects withdrawn from the world and released into the museum are held in a space of infinite recombination. A refuge for things and people--literally, a building dedicated to the muses and the arts they inspire, a space in which to muse, to be inspired--the museum puts people and things into a relationship quite unlike anything encountered in the world outside. The museum brings past, present, and future together in ways distinctly its own. It is a theatre in the root sense of the word, from the theater (Greek: *theātron*) as a space structured to accommodate viewers, and theory (Greek: *theōriā*), which links viewing with contemplation or speculation. But the museum is also theater in the sense of dramaturgy, stagecraft, and performance, as Donald Preziosi explores in his contribution to this volume.²

Let us recover the protean nature of museum in the spirit of a Renaissance idea of the museum as "the axis through which all other structures of collection, categorizing, and knowing intersected; interweaving with words, images, and things it provided a space common to all."³ According to Paula Findlen, "the Renaissance notion of museum defined imaginary space...[and] was a methodological premise that translated itself into a wide variety of social and cultural forms."⁴ The many terms by which it was known are indicative of the ways in which an expansive notion of museum "allowed it to cross and confuse the intellectual and philosophical categories of *biblioteca*, *thesaurus*, and *pandechion* with visual constructs such as *cornucopia* and *gazophylacium*, and spatial constructs such as *studio*, *casino*, *cabinet/gabinetto*, *galleria* and *theatro*."⁵ The museum was a *theatrum* (or *domus*) *sapientiae*, a *theatrum mundi*, a microcosm. It was a treasure, mirror, forest, and archive.⁶ As a physical entity, the museum might take the form of a free-standing cabinet, a room, a building, a garden, or a book, which provided a defined

space for the gathering and arranging of objects and the contemplation or study of them, whether according to a pastoral or monastic ideal. Whatever it was called and whatever form it took, the museum was above all an idea and a set of practices.

Both utopia and the museum are an art practice. As Michael Fehr makes clear in his contribution to this volume, the art museum is in a special position because the very idea of art is itself linked to utopian ideals. The faith in the power of art to make the world a better place animated the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, the Hagen Impulse at the turn of that century, and the various twentieth-century avant-gardes (Futurism, Surrealism, Expressionism). These movements and those that have followed continue to alter the very nature of the museum itself, by intervening in its physical and social fabric, challenging its ability to accommodate new kinds of art, and questioning the nature of art and of the museum in relation to society, as it is and as it might be imagined. Art and the museum are mutually constitutive.

As an art practice, the museum is marked by concreteness, materiality, and performance. It is a making that is a doing. This making is no less speculative for being so concrete. Thus, the museum is not simply a place for representing utopia, but rather a site for practicing it as a way of imagining. This is the basis for the Museutopia project at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum. The approach is, to use Gregory L. Ulmer's formulation, *heuretic*, rather than *hermeneutic*, experimental and constructive rather than exegetical and anatomical: as Ulmer explains, "the artists demonstrate the consequences of the theories for the arts by practicing the arts themselves, generating models of prototypes that function critically as well as aesthetically. The vanguardist does not analyze existing art but composes alternatives to it (or uses it as a step toward achieving alternatives)." ⁷ Ulmer proposes to "make a theory of method" by bringing together critical interpretation and artistic experimentation, precisely the program of Museutopia. ⁸

While literary utopias locate their imagined perfect society in a purely imaginative space, the museum as we know it is both located somewhere and locational. It is a place and it places, which is essential to its power to mobilize memory. The museum is a place of deep, not dead, storage. "Because, says Aristotle, in order to remember things, it suffices to recognize the place where they happen to be (place is therefore the element of an association of ideas, of a conditioning, of a training, of a mnemonics)..." ⁹ The museum as Mnemosyne, mother of the muses and of memory itself, not only spares the past from oblivion, saves it for future recall, calls forth and calls back, remembers—lest we forget. The museum is also a place of experience that actively works with and on memory, which is precisely what Proust so loved about it. Adorno captures this idea when he writes that "He adores museums as though they were God's true creation, which in Proust's metaphysics is never complete but always occurring anew in each concrete experience, each original artistic intuition." ¹⁰ This is the museum as "'force field' between subject and object," with memory the mediating term: "works of art return home when they become elements of the observer's subjective stream of consciousness." ¹¹ The same can be said for many other kinds of objects in museums.

The disjointed world brought into the museum, its pieces arranged in space, is defined by gaps (gaps in the record, gaps in the collection, gaps in the narrative) and by leaps (intuitive leaps, poetic leaps, leaps of faith). The gaps, the air between things, are not simply voids. They are openings. The creator of the Dennis Severs House in Spitalfields, London, an eighteenth-century house inhabited by a felt, but never seen, fictional Huguenot family, asks, rhetorically, "In fact, is it—the *space between* things—not as strong as, if not stronger, than anything else?... The Space Between is the invisible, shared third element that lies between any two sides." ¹² This "still-life drama," which is how Severs characterizes his creation, is not to be mistaken for an historic house or set of period rooms. It is rather an opera in as many acts as there rooms, each filled with

tangible indices of unseen presences and actions interrupted (a half-eaten pear, a fresh pie, one slice removed, a glass of wine just poured, the rustle of a curtain, sound of door closing, a creaking floor board) and the intangibles of heavy air, pale light, flickering fire, cold draft, perfect stillness: “The experience is conducted in silence, and its level is *poetic*; and like anything so—it works best on those who are *endowed, willing and able* to meet it halfway. The house’s motto is ‘*You either see it or you don’t.*’ Post-materialist, it seeks to remind a visitor of a scientific thing: that *what we cannot see is essential to what we do.*”¹³

Though deeply knowledgeable about the periods evoked in the house, Severs has proceeded, not hermeneutically, but heuristically (from *heuresis* or invention, in rhetorical theory and logic). It is not what he makes *of* his collection of antiques, but rather what he makes *with* them that matters.¹⁴ His project is not exegetical but generative. It is premised on an intuitive art of discovery and invention, not one that is transparent to reason.¹⁵ Such places cannot be grasped in one visit. As Ivan Chitchevlov, a Russian political theorist who took up Fourier’s ideas, wrote of Chirico, “He was grappling with the problems of absences and presences in time and space”:

We know that an object that is not consciously noticed at the time of a first visit can, by its absence during subsequent visits, provoke an indefinable impression: as a result of this sighting backward in time, the absence of the object becomes a presence one can feel. More precisely: although the quality of the impression generally remains indefinite, it nevertheless varies with the nature of the removed object and the importance accorded it by the visitor, ranging from serene joy to terror.¹⁶

The illusiveness of such sites—not only because of what is felt but not seen, but also because of what was seen but went unnoticed—requires that one return to them over and over again.

To think about the museum as an art practice—not only museums of art but museums of anything—is to recognize that art is itself a mode of inquiry, that science is an art, and that the capacity to think is linked to the capacity to feel.¹⁷ Roland Barthes identifies the poetics of the images in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* with an overflow of meanings that arise because—not in spite of—their demonstrative intent and insistent didacticism. He defines poetics in this context as “the sphere of the infinite vibrations of meaning, at the center of which is placed the literal object. We can say there is not one plate of the *Encyclopédie* that does not vibrate well beyond its demonstrative intent. This singular vibration is above all an astonishment.”¹⁸ The *Encyclopédie*, which Barthes identifies with the museum and the world’s fair, makes literal objects mysterious and mythical by virtue of a distinct set of practices. Those practices include not only the transformative power of “depth of time” and the capacity of metaphor to make the literal ambiguous, but also the act of “isolating elements from their practical context,” doubling “the explained world by a new world to be explained,” attending scrupulously to detail, and shifting levels of perception, so that “it is by dint of didacticism that a kind of wild surrealism is generated here.”¹⁹

In contrast with the printed page of the *Encyclopédie* and of literary utopias, the disposition of things and persons in the space of the museum organizes the sensory experience of a mobile observer. This experience calls for spatial and kinetic intelligence, for an ability to think with and within a materialized space of a very special kind. The senses are intelligent. The body knows. Facts are felt. Curiosity is an emotion. Historian of science Lorraine Daston writes a history of curiosity (and its emotional structure) in relation to the other emotions as a way of illuminating the history of science in the early modern period. As curiosity “shifted its position in the European map of the emotions from a close proximity to lust and pride, to a similarly close relationship to greed and avarice,” the “curious object” came to be associated with the exotic,

bizarre, beautiful, rare, novel, monstrous, diverse, small, detailed, hidden.²⁰ Wonder arose from an ignorance of causes, but a major shift occurred from a divine explanation of what were viewed as marvels and miracles to a search for natural causes and the understanding that “Without wonder, there would be no curiosity, and without curiosity, no science.”²¹

Museums are important here, first, because those with long histories and old collections are in a good position to illuminate the history of “how intellectual work is saturated with moral, emotional and aesthetic elements at a collective, and not just biographical level.”²² Museums are not only instruments for the shaping of sensibility, as Tony Bennett and others have argued, but also their collections hold within them a history of sensibilities, their rise, demise, and potential for recuperation.²³ How might an older constellation of wonder, curiosity, and intense attention animate the museum as a contemporary utopian laboratory? This is an invitation to find the utopian potential of the museum not only in the achievements of the past, but also in its history as a materialized subjunctive space. It is in the museum’s capacity to provoke and sustain speculation, reflection, retrospection, prospection, whether reasoned or dreamed, that its utopian possibilities lie. What this might look like is suggested by Lesley Sharp in the manifesto, in this volume, for the National Museum of Museum and Industry, a “family of museums,” in the United Kingdom.

The collection is essential to the museum, as envisioned here, not only because of the value of each and every object in it, but above all by virtue of being a collection. True, the whole may be greater than the sum of the parts. But it is the loosely jointed nature of that whole that makes the collection not only a reservoir from which to draw but also an active field of infinite combinatory potential, a space of coincidence, accident, and incident. And, a space of information, “if we define ‘information’ (as cybernetics does) as a function of unpredictability”—“The more predictable the message, the less information it contains.”²⁴ How does the museum, despite its best efforts to create certainty, produce unpredictability? Through fragmentation, aggregation, selection, juxtaposition, connection, contrast, excess, and confusion.

If there are two major utopian models, one the reasoned, ordered world, the other Breton’s utopia of the dream, with all of its surrealist ideals, the museum’s utopian potential draws from both. For Proust, the caesuras of the museum—the severing of things from the world outside—is necessary for “the exhilarating happiness that can be had only in a museum, where the rooms, in their sober abstinence from all decorative detail, symbolize the inner spaces into which the artist withdraws to create the work.”²⁵ The utopian quality of the museum arises not only from the experience of individual works of art found within its walls, but from the museum experience as an art form. This is an autotelic experience, one that has its aim and its end, its telos, in itself, as is also the case with play. Indeed, the autotelic is fundamental to the museum, as a space of soft rather than hard mastery.²⁶

What is the nature of that space? Museums of all kinds are defined by an arrangement of objects in space that requires the visitor to walk. Indeed, it could be said that mobility is a defining feature of the museum and that utopian possibilities lie hidden within the museum’s psychogeography, that is, within the felt quality of its navigated space. However carefully planned, no matter how many maps, signs pointing the way, footsteps painted on the floor, or guards giving directions, the space of the museums is neither a seamless continuity, nor a continuous surface. And, while the space of the museum may seem overdetermined by its spatialized program and master narrative, it is finally underdetermined. It must be navigated. Those who so desire can move in ways not intended by the museum’s plan, letting chance play a part in the creation of situations, giving disorientation a chance, and allowing uncertainty in a rich

environment to open one to surprise, to connections one makes for oneself, to “things that make one’s heart beat faster,” to “dreamy excitement.”²⁷

Above all, the utopian imagination is about visualizing and modeling, whether in literary or material form. The utopian imagination catalyzes a kind of envisioning, a kind of modeling, that reflects on what is, by projecting what could be, either in the spirit of critique or in the hope of a transformative program. Utopias at their most utopian are unrealizable. They are neither models of something that already exists nor necessarily models for something to be brought into being. Literary utopias are well suited to this ideal. So too are museums.

- ¹ Marcin Fabianski, "Iconography of the Architecture of the Ideal *Musea* in the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of the History of Collections* 2, no. 2 (1990): 95-134.
- ² Donald Preziosi, "Haunted by Things. Utopias and their Consequences," in this volume.
- ³ Findlen, Paula, "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy," *Journal of the History of Collections* 1, no. 1 (1989): 59-78. See p. 63.
- ⁴ Findlen, "The Museum," p. 63.
- ⁵ Findlen, "The Museum," p. 59.
- ⁶ Findlen, "The Museum," p. 63.
- ⁷ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. xii.
- ⁸ Ulmer, *Heuretics*, p. 1.
- ⁹ Roland Barthes, "The Old Rhetoric: An Aide-Memoire," *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1988), p. 65, quoted by Ulmer, *Heuretics*, p. 33.
- ¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber, 175-85 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 181.
- ¹¹ Adorno, p. 184.
- ¹² Dennis Severs. *18 Folgate Street: The Life of a House in Spitalfields* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 37. Severs, pp. 99-100.
- ¹³ Visitor pamphlet, Dennis Severs' House, 2002.
- ¹⁴ See Michael Jarrett, "Heuretics Defined," <http://www.yk.psu.edu/~jmj3/defheu.htm>. Date of last access January 19, 2004.
- ¹⁵ See Ulmer, *Heuretics*, pp. ix-xiii.
- ¹⁶ "Ivan Chtcheglov (pseudonym: Gilles Ivain), "Formulary for a New Urbanism," translated by Ken Knabb, slightly modified from the version in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Chtcheglov.htm>. Date of last access January 19, 2004. Chtcheglov drafted this piece in 1953 and published it in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* (1958).
- ¹⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 79.
- ¹⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the Encyclopedia," *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard, 23-40 (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), p. 35.
- ¹⁹ Barthes, "The Plates of the Encyclopedia," pp. 34, 35, 38, 39.
- ²⁰ Lorraine Daston, "Curiosity in Early Modern Science," *Word & Image* 11, no. 4 (1995): 391-404. P. 392.
- ²¹ Daston, "Curiosity in Early Modern Science," p. 397.
- ²² Daston, "Curiosity in Early Modern Science," p. 403.
- ²³ See Tony Bennett. *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Carol Duncan. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- ²⁴ Robert B. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 6, and Robert B Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 13.
- ²⁵ Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," p. 178, 179.
- ²⁶ Inspired by Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York : Simon & Schuster, 1995), I discuss these distinctions more fully in "The Museum As Catalyst," *Museum 2000 - Confirmation or Challenge?*, ed. Per-Uno Ågren (Stockholm: Stockholm: Riksställningar [Swedish Travelling Exhibitions], Svenska museiföreningen [Swedish Museum Association], 2002), 55-66.
- ²⁷ Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 143 and 154. On psychogeography as an avant-garde art practice, see Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992).