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The Museum of the Future: a sedimentary cloud

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Abstract: Taking our cue from the impact of Joseph Kosuth’s 1965 conceptual artwork One and Three Chairs, there has always been one and three museums—the cosmos is the museum of light, the city is the museum of space and given the job of the museum is to indefinitely accumulate time the museum today is the museum of time. In this paper we present a fourth—the museum of the future. The museum and the department store were concurrent designs of industrialization; one—the store—collected the here-and-now and sold it as what-might-become while the other—the museum—collected what-was and projected it as what-we-have-become. However, the manifest crises of the planet illustrate the limits of our capacity to persuade ourselves we can imagine a future in which we want to live, and cast urgency on the long-term design project of being together. And the project of being together in the urban age is driving us to change the entire terrain of thought and action. Where once ideas drove change, change now appears to be split between two projects whose temporal dimensions govern the notion of ‘future’. One is the busy sharing of digital records of the as-found, and counter to this digital archive is the revival of designs of what-might-become illustrated in the boom in digital imagery of fantasy futures. In order to now imagine a future it has become necessary to navigate the competing time frames of the digital archiving of the past and the digital reproduction of the future. But for Jacques Derrida the question of the archive is not a question of the past but a question of the future, of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. According to him “the archive—if we want to know what this will have meant we will only know tomorrow.” And Hal Foster disconnects the archive from the museum when he questions “Might visual culture rely on techniques of information to transform a wide range of mediums into a system of image-text—a database of digital terms—an archive without museums?” In this paper we propose this temporal disjuncture—archive and future—can be bridged by the design of what we call the Museum of the Future whose windows open onto the permanent present. The Museum of the Future is not a location for the sentimental accumulation of time in the form of tasteful objects. According to Cedric Price “neither knowledge nor value can be stored and contained in a particular place” therefore “the museum of the future initiates a process of constant revision that assures the contingency and non-solidity of a building”. Following from Price we propose the Museum of the Future is a continuous interior whose form, stretched to compass the cumulous cloud of digital sentimentiality and reproduction, functions as a sedimentary layer for our imaginings of increasingly populous and proximate future relations.

Key words: design, museum, future, digital, archive
1. Museums are sanctimonious Junkspace\(^1\)

Almost immediately, any discussion about the museum of the future can be seen to be a classic design problem. That is, if it is acceptable to define design as something that mediates in one way or another between idea and manufacture — i.e. a message or what is being said and a medium or how it is being said. In the case of the museum somehow the making of the museum — its medium — has become detached from its idea — its message. And this problem with the museum is clear not only from Koolhaas’ wisecrack about its pretension, but also from our indifference as Hal Foster explains; “That the museum is mostly ruined as a coherent system in a public sphere is generally assumed, not triumphantly proclaimed or melancholically pondered;” (Foster, 2015, p.34). Our indifference to the museum was prefigured by Jameson in his influential book on postmodernism; 

“For with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style...the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles...stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.” (Jameson, 1991, p.16)

As rapidly as global culture became a problem global style became a design project and the interviewer, curator and producer of contemporary style par excellence, Hans Ulrich Obrist, almost as if in conversation with Jameson, resolved this imaginary museum; 

“In May of 1992, I founded the Robert Walser Museum as a museum on the move... The idea was to establish a non-monumental, modest, and very discreet museum, an elastic institution which could permanently question its own definitions and parameters and...to maintain the museum in a permanent transformation and try to avoid routine.” (Obrist, 2003, p.148)

But when talking about the museum Jameson and Obrist were inevitably talking about the one familiar variant, although as Obrist has demonstrated he is open to broadening the variations slightly to “explore how museums can be envisioned not as homogeneous spaces but as a site that satisfies a diversity of conditions so that, let’s say, the white cube, a laboratory and a space for intimate conversation can coexist. (Ibid, p.150).

In contrast to these somewhat conventional spatial options, in this paper we take a cue from the concept behind Joseph Kosuth’s 1965 conceptual artwork “One and Three Chairs”. In this work any chair (chair 1) is placed by a wall in a museum; a photograph of that chair (chair 2) is taken in-situ in the museum, printed actual size and hung on the wall where the photograph was taken; plus a dictionary definition of the word chair (chair 3) as wall text. We propose that there have always been one and three museums. And in addition to these three museums we propose there has always existed a fourth—the museum of the future—existing between the idea of the museum and the assembly of the museum.

All four museums chronicle events past, present and future possible and impossible. These last two temporal dimensions are the operational limits of design. Paradoxically, the museum of the future is where we will eventually find that the discovery of limits 50 years ago marks the beginning of design’s inability to envisage a future possible. And it was easier to imagine the future then whereas now to imagine a future it is necessary to navigate competing time frames from the digital archiving of the past in online social archives to the digital reproduction of the revival of utopian fantasy futures.

\(^1\) Koolhaas, R. (2002) “Junkspace”, October, 100, p.188
2. The museum of light

It is probable that Kosuth took his cue from Plato’s tenth book of The Republic, where three beds illustrate the idea of the bed depicted by God, an ideal imitation made by a carpenter, and a less than ideal imitation of the carpenter’s bed painted by an artist.

Rather than a theological reading, in a cosmological sense in a universe that is estimated to be 13.7 billion years old courtesy of technological advances in telescopes we are now able to see light from a primordial galaxy making its way to us now from perhaps a mere 380 million years after the ‘big bang’. In order to be able to almost see our own origins the cosmos must contain all the light from the beginning of the known universe. Therefore the cosmos is a museum of light.

However, as a museum of light this exhibit from the beginning of time is problematic. Some time ago Jean-François Lyotard (1991), citing the two bookends of modern science, reminded us that just as we can detect weak signals from the Big Bang presenting the exciting prospect we might eventually ‘witness’ our own birth, given we are at the half-way mark of the sun’s life span with the death of the sun we can foresee our death. These signals – our birth and death – one emanating and the other enervating – permeate much of what we currently do, which amounts to just cleansing the difficulties or smoothing over the problems.

3. The museum of space

With the light by which we can conceive of space the city, according to Cedric Price, is visible as the “collection of artifactual dross (that) caused the existence of museums and slums”. (Vodanovic, 2017, p.8)

Mike Davis, relentless social conscious of design reminds us that “Sheer demographic momentum...will increase the world’s urban population by 3 billion people over the next 40 years (90% of them in poor cities), and no one—absolutely no one—has a clue how a planet of slums, with growing food and energy crises, will accommodate their biological survival, much less their inevitable aspirations to basic happiness and dignity” (Davis, 2008). Given 60% of the future population of the world will live in urban slums the urban age will produce the single museum we will call city. Therefore the city is the museum of space.

Even in the industrialised world with 25% of all dwellings already having a single occupant single-person households will increase 65% in the next 25 years. Clearly, living together is a failed technological project. Being together is a cosmopolitan project equal parts domestic and global

As Guy Debord explained in his first stanza of Society of the Spectacle; “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail. All of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (Debord, 1994:thesis 1), which asks the question—has the image replaced the lived experience of the museum? This was the same question Kosuth asked by his one and three chairs.

4. The museum of time

Bringing the museum into the perspective of the contemporary frame it is important to remember that the museum and department store are concurrent products of industrialisation. The department store was the repercussion of the split of idea from manufacture. It could stockpile the aggregation of mass-production from the here-and-now and by design sell it as what-might-become. The museum archived what-was and by its design arranged this archive to show what-we-have-become.
Both traded in nostalgia “as a historical emotion ... coeval with the birth of mass culture. In the mid-
nineteenth century, nostalgia became institutionalized in national and provincial museums, heritage
foundations, and urban memorials.” (Boym, 2007, p.13). Rapidly, the museum has become an
archive of outmoded knowledge formations sedimented in collections, catalogues, and storage
displays for the well-trained visitor,

As a consequence, as the ever astute Bifo Berardi explains in After the Future “The dismantling of
industry is unstoppable for the simple reason that social life does not need industrial labour any
more” (2011, p.152) Therefore without industrial production what will the museum of the future
collect?

The answer to this question reveals the third of the one and three museums—the third museum is
the collection of time. The museum’s job is to indefinitely accumulate time, which is exactly as
described by Foucault in his enigmatic text Of Other Spaces;

“The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the
will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of
constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its
ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite
accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to the museum

But as the archive of light space and time of time the museum runs into a problem identified by
Derrida, “the question of the archive is not a question of the past... but a question of the future, the
very question of the future, of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The
archive—if we want to know what this will have meant we will only know tomorrow”. (Derrida, 1996,
p.36). Much later Hal Foster asks “might visual culture rely on techniques of information to transform
a wide range of mediums into a system of image-text—a database of digital terms—an archive
without museums?” And Ted Striphas explains “over the last 30 years or so, human beings have been
delegating the work of culture—the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects
and ideas—increasingly to computational processes.” (2015, p.395). Therefore the advent of digital
technologies has altered our relationship to the material world and our bodies, and industrial culture
ceased to be sentimental, giving rise to our proposal in this paper.

5. The museum of the future

Returning to our proposal in this paper—the museum of the future—if it exists as we propose,
somewhere between the idea of the museum and the assembly of the museum, then it runs into
another problem of distinction between being an idea versus an ideal;

“The new must be distinguished from the utopian. In other words, the new stands
in opposition to the future as much as to the past. Authors living in a
technologically archived culture such as ours—in contrast to those who lived in
more troubled times and cultures—no longer endeavor, as a rule, to ensure that
their views or artistic methods become compulsory or, at least, will exercise a
decisive influence in the future” (Groys, 2014, p.41)

Here Groys is playing with the concept of change that is split between two projects whose temporal
dimensions govern the idea of the ‘future’. One dimension is the busy sharing of digital records of
the world-as-found—increasingly archived as the default setting. Counter to this digital archive is the
revival of projections of what-might-become illustrated in the boom in digital imagery of fantasy
futures
Without industrial production and with the digital producing fantasy futures the museum of the future will not be collection based and its highly likely exhibitions will not feature objects. The boom in virtual worlds has already produced its own museum of failed or superseded accumulations of time and some sort of ideal space. Therefore from the point of view of the museum of the future reality is what is not yet collected. But the historic preference for collecting is a sentimental misrepresentation of time and space causing us to return to the core questions driving all design thought and action—one already posed in this paper ‘what-might-become’—and its reciprocal ‘what-might-not-become?’ Museums would say they leave the relationship between the actual and the imaginary to the viewer, but they have always resorted to persuading the viewer, by design (there is no other way) to see through its eyes.

Therefore to imagine a future it is now necessary to navigate the competing time frames of the digital cataloguing of the past and the digital reproduction of the future. However, image capture is producing a project of digital nostalgia. Only the present can be captured... immediately becoming the past... about which we grow nostalgic using the archive to misrepresent possible futures. The Museum of the Future is not a site for the sentimental accumulation of time in the form of tasteful objects. According to the radical architect, Cedric Price. “neither knowledge nor value can be stored and contained in a particular place” (Vodanovic, 2007, p.7). Both Marcel Duchamp’s ‘portable museum’ (Boîte en valise series 1935–1940) and André Malraux’s musée imaginaire (Museum Without Walls) explored exactly this problem of storage. Malraux explained, “hither to the connoisseur duly visited the Louvre and some subsidiary galleries, and memorized what he saw, as best he could. We, however, have far more great works available to refresh our memories than those which even the greatest of museums could bring together. For a "Museum Without walls" is coming into being, and . . . it will carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art...which the "real" museums offer us within our walls” (Malraux, 1953, p.16)

As we state at the outset, in order to overcome both indifference and pretense the future of the idea of the museum and its project present new problems for design. The case we are making in this paper is that the Museum of the Future will have to confront the cumulous cloud of digital sentimentality and reproduction. To do that we take another clue from Foucault when he explains,

“the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. The oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world. As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens. The garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space”. (Foucault, 1986, p.25)

Just as Malraux, Duchamp, Price and Obrist attempt to combine space and time as different types of museum, heterotopia also transforms the contrast between space and time but into the carpet as the medium for the collection of the entire world “that can move across space” —i.e. the model for the design for the mobile archive. Think of the boom in aesthetically pleasing info-graphics trying to illustrate the data and social networks, flows of populations and capital, mobility and logistics, all fertile new gardens woven and cultivated into beautiful two dimensional patterns (or carpet designs) to be exhibited in any museum of the future.

If the focus of design has always been self-design via individual accumulation this accords with the radical architects Superstudio for whom there was only one possible life-long design project—
autobiography. And even if we are unconscious of the project of self-design as autobiography Boris Groys reminds us that museums have always been design projects.

“when somebody dies, the things they chose and used remain available. If the person was famous, a museum may keep these things as a substitute for the absent body. Thus, the use of things is a form of self-design: things are not only tools for practical life but also manifestations of their user’s soul. In fact, as heirs to palaces and churches, art museums were originally design museums.” (Groys, 2016)

Extrapolating from Groys then all things result from the activity of self-design and, according to Foucault, in the totality of the world the carpet is the metaphor for all things, so the museum of the future is the site of self-design. Peter Sloterdijk sums this up when he explains;

“we are now living an epoch in which a more or less satisfied and luxurious conscience is learning the art of arranging its space. Modern man is a sort of ‘curator’ … which is to say, an exhibition planner of the space that he himself inhabits. Every man has become a museum curator. We could say that installation art is the common meta-profession that everyone is obliged to practice. The innocence of the traditional habitat is lost for good.” (Sloterdijk, 2005, p.230)

We now have no choice but to curate autobiography and do that the museum of the future must exit the walled garden and carpet because representations of the universe must now encompass new scales of existence and institutional representation.

“In postmodernity, we no longer exist in a world of human scale: institutions certainly have in some sense become autonomous, but in another they transcend the dimensions of any individual, whether master or servant; something that can also be grasped by reminding ourselves of the dimension of globalization in which institutions today exist, the museum very much included. But these institutions are no longer to be conceived along the lines of machines or the factory, or in terms of what used to be called ‘the state’: communications technology requires us to think of them as informational institutions, perhaps, or immense constructions in cyberspace.” (Jameson, 2015, p.111)

Timothy Morton sums this up when he says “We are the curators of a gigantic museum of non-art in which we have found ourselves, a spontaneous museum of hyperobjects.” (2013, p.121). If we follow the logic of Jameson’s constructions in cyberspace (e.g. the museum of facebook) and Morton’s notion of hyperobjects (e.g. the museum of self-design) then we are already the exhibits in the museum of the future.

Proposing designs well before cyberspace containing hyperobjects Cedric Price had already identified the future role of the museum was to “preserve or produce conditions—which may mean buildings—or at least enclosures—that recognise and satisfy the increasing capacity of society to change its mind and enjoyably benefit from such a continuous choice pattern”. (Vodanovic, p.9) The museum of the future initiates “a process of constant revision that assures the contingency and non-solidity of a building” (Ibid p.7), where “objects, monuments, and urban spaces cannot be preserved as relics, but as lived, changeable, and expendable life-value sources, which can be used, reused, misused, or disused.” (Ibid, p.10)

For Andrea Branzi the boundaries are already open as he describes “behind an apparent immobility of the architectural scene we can discover that there have been realised universities inside abandoned factories, museums inside gasometers, housing in warehouses, art galleries in garages, banks and laboratories. Nothing of which was programmed corresponds today to its real use.” (2008,
The museum of today is neither institution nor archive nor edifice—it is a project of capital to constitute the mercantile spectacular as Martha Rosler states:

“In the experience economy, a primary mission of museums has become the promise not of cultivation and contemplation but rather edification and amazement, for visitors from toddlers to the elderly and for people of every social class. The experience economy demands authenticity, which axiomatically takes shape as heightened faux emotion. Like public relations happytalk, museums and galleries are publicly thrilled, excited, and delighted.” (Rosler, 2016, p.2)

Looking at what we have settled in this paper, it is apparent that the role and function of the museum in any time frame—past, present or future—has been clouded by what has become its well intentioned but misguided rationale in a society characterized by indifference to anything but a ‘pimped’ spectacle of self-design.

6. Conclusion: a cloudy sediment

Given that the museum is reliant on a very public social present in this conclusion we will try to describe the design of the museum of the future. If the department store replaced the museum as the repository of the things of social value and the current incarnation of the department store is Amazon as the store for everything, it is easy to mistakenly imagine the museum of the future could be both the internet of things and/or the digital cloud and archive as the archive for the things of the internet. While Amazon is a good enough equation to the department store, it is not so easy to equate the internet for the museum of the future. And it is not so easy because we have shown the museum of the future is the product of self-design and therefore corporeal, so it must be designed with the capacity to confront, relate and relate to other objects, structures and people. If the carpet is where the body knows its own boundaries and orientation in space, then the museum of the future is becoming performative and theatrical—or operatic—inside a continuous interior whose form must stretch to encompass the cumulous cloud of digital nostalgia and reproduction. It must function to deposit and analyse the sedimentary layers of design’s imaginings of living together on an increasingly populous and proximate planet. If it were a carpet, the museum of the future would leave a visible trace or manifestation of relationships that are made from the sum of what-might-become plus what-might-not-become. However, the museum of the future is everyone’s personal (digital) project within the frame of a carpet (not a cloud)—a space that can encompass all dimensions of experience in one space. The design of this space has the capacity to illustrate to ourselves we can in fact imagine a future in which we want to live, which is the long-term design project of being together. The current museum is an archive of outmoded knowledge formations that have cemented themselves in collections, particular modes of display, and the well-conditioned dispositions of viewers. In contrast the museum of the future will either be full of the emptiness of human relations celebrating and invisible spectacle of capital. Or the museum of the future will be where design finally reconciles the split between idea and manufacture and instead of filling the world with dross, projects new models for living on a planet at the edge of its limits.

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