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Introduction: the future of permanence in an age of ephemera

by Roger Kimball

An introduction to The New Criterion's symposium on museums.

Every age has its architectural master projects, those programs that not only attract the signal architectural talent of the time but also, in the reach of their tentacles, seem to epitomize the civilizational ambitions of a culture.1 At one time in the West, that node of interest centered around the Church, at another the palace, at another the town square and attendant civil structures.

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Explaining why this should be the case is a complicated story that involves art, ambition, civic pride, money, snobbery, and many other edifying and not so edifying impulses. Later on in this special section, the art historians Marco Grassi and Michael J. Lewis will have something to say about the birth and development of the modern museum. For now, it is simply worth reminding ourselves of two things: first, of how recent a phenomenon is the art museum in our contemporary sense; and, second, what a change in the metabolism of our relationship with art the modern museum both reflected and helped instigate and abet.

André Malraux touched on both issues when he observed in *The Voices of Silence* (1949) that art museums "have existed for barely two hundred years. They bulked so large in the nineteenth century," said Malraux, "and are so much part of our lives today that we forget they have imposed upon the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art. For they have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even

portraits into 'pictures.' "

Michael J. Lewis reminds us below that the art museum in the modern sense had precursors reaching back at least to the sixteenth century. But what had been once a "mere collection," as Malraux put it, had by the nineteenth century become "a sort of *shrine*." Whence the element of reverence? And what rites are practiced there?

The Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmayr elaborated on this point when he wrote, in *Art in Crisis* (1947), that

> Regarded as a temple, the museum is not the temple of any particular God but a Pantheon of Art in which the creations of the most varied epochs and peoples are ranged next to one another with equal claims to our attention. For this to be possible, however, it was first necessary that the divinities for whom the works were created in the first place should themselves be undeified. "It was necessary [Sedlmayr quotes the aesthetician Hubert Schrade here] for Heracles and Christ to become brothers and for their divinity to be regarded as a thing of the past, so that they could be seen in the temple of art, as manifestations of a deity which had swallowed all the others."

Art maintained a sacral aura but was detached from its original religious situation. With the evolution of the art museum, art itself became *aestheticized*, enjoyed primarily for its own sake, not as a marker of some transcendent reality.

It might seem odd to say that art was "aestheticized," for we tend to think of those terms as being almost synonyms. It was not always so. Indeed, it is worth noting that the term "aesthetic" in our contemporary sense is of fairly recent vintage, having been coined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century. Art, of course, is vastly older, being coterminous with the birth of our humanity.

Malraux and Sedlmayr were writing in the mid-twentieth century. They looked back to Romanticism and its heavy, quasi-religious investment in art to explain the character of the art museum. They both have a lot of pertinent things to say about museums and the evolution of our expectations for art. A critical point, however, is that our understanding of the vocation of the art museum is intimately tied to our understanding of the vocation of art. Mutations in one realm are naturally reflected by mutations in the other.

With this in mind, it is worth pondering what fearsome changes have been visited upon that little word "art" over the course of the last century. Telling that story in anything like its full exotic detail is a tall order. But in the context of this discussion about the place of the art museum in our culture, it is enough to note the extent to which the word "art" has degenerated into a kind of honorific that is bestowed or withheld for reasons that can have little or nothing to do with aesthetic quality or achievement. What does it mean—to take just a few examples—that

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someone can package his own feces and distribute the result as works of art? Or that someone can have herself videotaped undergoing a series of disfiguring cosmetic surgeries and on that basis be hailed as a bona fide "performance artist"? Or that someone who is ill can successfully designate his hospital room a work of art?

As James Panero reminds us in his essay below, such examples can be multiplied indefinitely, as anyone who has visited a gallery or museum devoted to contemporary art or has conjured with such names as "Matthew Barney," "Jeff Koons," or "Damien Hirst" well knows. And note well that these examples are not specimens from the lunatic fringe. No, they occupy the lunatic center. Just one example: in 2000, the vaunted Tate Gallery in London paid £22,300 of public money for can number four (from an "edition" of ninety) of Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'Artista* (1961), thirty grams of the artist's excrement. What can one say?

In one sense, what we have been witnessing is the application of the principle of affirmative action to culture. Art confers prestige, celebrity, wealth; it is a social and economic blessing; therefore, its perquisites must be available to all regardless of talent or accomplishment. The logic is impeccable: only the premise and the consequences are disastrous. If anything can be a work of art, then it follows that anyone can be an artist.

Again, such ideas are not confined to the fringe. They are, in various degrees, a staple of establishment prejudice. One recalls Mr. John Hightower, a Rockefeller apparatchik who was briefly the director of the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1960s. In one memorable effusion, Mr. Hightower publicly delivered himself of the opinion that "I happen to think that everybody is an artist." If only Mr. Hightower had paid more attention to the logician W. S. Gilbert, who at least knew the awful secret that "when everybody is somebody then nobody is anybody." Hamlet said that art should "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." In the age of the selfie, the museum colludes in universal narcissism, transforming art into a prop and holding up the mirror to ourselves.

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As I say, explaining that change is a tall order, far beyond our remit in these essays. But I think it is safe to say that we all know that American culture has undergone drastic changes over the last several decades. Perhaps no cultural institution—with the possible exception of the university—has changed more drastically in that time than the art museum. Forty years ago, the typical art museum was a staid and stately place. Its architecture, often neo-classical, tended to suggest grandeur and to elicit contemplation. Soaring columns and marble halls bespoke an opulence of purpose as well as material wealth. Even museums that departed from the neo-classical model, such as New York's Museum of Modern Art—or Louis Kahn's Yale Center for British Art, discussed below by George Knight, the architect who oversaw its splendid renovation—strove to embody a dignified seriousness about the

vocation of art. Whatever its architectural vocabulary, the museum in this sense looks back in spirit to such lofty structures as Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin. It does not attempt to meet people on the level of their everyday experience, seducing them inside with quiche, cappuccino, and the latest art-world trend. Instead, it offers them a mode of experience that is patently different from—and perhaps more exalted than—their experience of everyday life.

Up through the 1950s, then, the museum was widely regarded as a "temple of art," a special place set apart from the vicissitudes of the quotidian. The decibel level was low, decorum high, and crowds, generally, were sparse. In the culture at large, there was broad agreement that the art museum had a twofold curatorial purpose: first, to preserve and exhibit objects of historical interest and commanding aesthetic achievement; and, second, to nurture the public's direct experience of those objects. "Art," not "amenity," came first on the museum's menu.

The seriousness of the art museum was a reflection of the seriousness of the art world. If some works of art were deliberately playful or even frivolous, art itself was entrusted with the important task of educating the imagination and helping to humanize and refine the emotions. Accordingly, art museums were democratic but not demotic institutions. They were open, but not necessarily accessible, to all. The bounty they offered exacted the homage of informed interest as the price of participation. Accessibility was a privilege anyone could earn, not a right that everyone automatically enjoyed.

The 1960s put paid to all that. There are still a handful of holdouts: odd institutions here and there that cling stubbornly to the old ways. There are also, as Karen Wilkin eloquently describes in her essay below, plenty of exquisite small exhibitions designed by and for the delectation of connoisseurs on view at major museums. But such gems, though precious, tend to occupy the little-traveled byways of the art world. The "blockbuster" mentality that began developing in the 1960s, as Eric Gibson atomizes here in "Notes on the postmodern museum," helped to transform many art museums into all-purpose cultural emporia. Increasingly, success was measured by quantity, not quality, by the take at the box office rather than at the bar of aesthetic discrimination.

Indeed, as the egalitarian imperatives of the Sixties insinuated themselves more and more thoroughly into mainstream culture, the very ideal of aesthetic excellence came under fire. Critics castigated what they called "the masterpiece mentality," the retrograde idea that adulated "hero objects" and presumed that some works exerted a greater claim on our attention than others. Entertainment and diversion, not connoisseurship, was the order of the day. Many commentators—even many artists—rejected outright the pursuit of aesthetic excellence, which they repudiated as an "elitist" holdover from the discredited hierarchies of the past. Others subordinated the aesthetic dimension of art to one or another political program or social obsession. Notoriety, not artistic accomplishment, became the chief goal of art, even as terms like "challenging" and "transgressive" took precedence over "beautiful" and other traditional epithets in the lexicon of critical commendation.

Art was still a talismanic necessity, the presence of which underwrote an institution's social pretensions as well as its tax-exempt status. But increasingly art functioned more as a catalyst than an end in itself, as Bruce Cole writes here in "The museum as 'town hall' "—one attraction among many and not necessarily the most important. The coffee bar or restaurant, the movie theater or gift store or interactive computer center vied for attention. Art merely added the desired patina of cultural sophistication, the increasingly faint echo of civilizational aspiration.

The triumph of quantity over quality showed itself in other ways as well. It used to be that art museums were like oases: relatively few and far between. Suddenly there was a Niagara of new art clamoring for attention. Established art museums undertook ambitious building programs to house the stuff; museumless towns and college campuses scurried to remedy their lack. When it came to anything that could be congregated under the banner of "the arts," the watchword was "more is better." Everywhere one looked there was a new or greatly expanded museum or arts center. No self-respecting population dared be without some visible "commitment to the arts." But the curious logic that subordinated aesthetic to political considerations also meant that while possessing a museum became a badge of social respectability, "respectability" itself had become a deeply suspect idea. Art museums are still monuments to civic pride—and, sometimes, assets to civic coffers. The irony is that today many museums extol values utterly at odds with the civilization that produced and that continues to sustain them.

It is a very odd situation. On the one hand, museums everywhere seem determined to transform themselves into an extension of the entertainment and recreation industry. On the other hand, behind the coffee bars, video arcades, and Matisse T-shirts, umbrellas, and scarves, more and more museums are committing themselves to a radical revisionist program that would have us view all art through the lens of political, social, or environmental activism. The result is what we might call cappuccino radicalism. It pretends to "challenge" or "transgress" the boundaries of conventional taste. In fact, despite its "avant-garde" pretensions—what the critic Clement Greenberg once called "avant-gardism"—it is merely the self-absorbed conventional taste of the day, the new Salon taste, often repellent, it is true, but utterly predictable.

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Perhaps this is the place to mention the endless talk one hears about the "educational" and didactic function of the "new" museum. It is gleefully pointed out that there are more "resource centers" and computer-imaging systems, more publications and symposia in the new museum than in their stuffy counterparts of old. There are endless tours for schoolchildren and lectures for adults. Is this not a marvelous thing, bringing ever more art, in an ever more entertaining fashion, to ever more people? A moment's thought tells us that what is being offered to the public in the guise of an educational resource is often really a kind of deception of the public. What they are getting is not culture but a bill of goods. The philosopher Hannah Arendt saw this with exceptional clarity.

"What is at stake here," she wrote in "The Crisis in Culture,"

> is the objective status of the cultural world, which, insofar as it contains tangible things— books and paintings, statues, buildings, and music—comprehends, and gives testimony to, the entire recorded past of countries, nations, and ultimately mankind. As such, the only nonsocial and authentic criterion for judging these specifically cultural things is their relative permanence and even eventual immortality. Only what will last through the centuries can ultimately claim to be a cultural object.

Arendt then goes on to make an argument that is deeply at odds with therapeutic idea of the museum that reigns supreme:

> The point of the matter is that, as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality, which is to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries. . . . The result of this is not disintegration but decay, and those who promote it are not the Tin Pan Alley composers but a special kind of intellectual, often well read and well informed, whose sole function is to organize, disseminate, and change cultural objects in order to persuade the masses that *Hamlet* can be as entertaining as *My Fair Lady*, and perhaps educational as well. There are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say.

Some years ago, a writer for *The New York Times* greeted this transformation in enthusiastic terms, contrasting the dark times of the past when museums encouraged "contemplation" and existed "primarily for elite visitors." Today, this writer noted, all that has changed. "The age of museums," she wrote, "is not to be confused with the age of art or the age of art appreciation. Much museumgoing is not about art at all. It's simply social . . . . It's entertainment, not enlightenment or inspiration."

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I think that writer was correct in her diagnosis, if not in her enthusiasm. As Philippe de Montebello wrote at the time,

> The trouble is that works of art, for the most part, are not fun. In fact, they can be difficult, challenging, even provocative, and they don't yield their message in the blink of an eye—which is what is expected by people looking to have fun. Seriousness, uplift, knowledge and, naturally, pleasure are what art museums are meant to provide.

The question is, do they still? We called this conference "The Future of Permanence in an Age of Ephemera." Most of us, I suspect, continue to regard the art museum as an ally in the battle for permanence, a bastion against the corrosive claims of the ephemeral. The melancholy truth, as Philippe de Montebello points out in his essay below, is that that battle, finally, is doomed to failure. In this sublunary world, our longing for permanence is gratified only provisionally. Horace boasted that his poems represented a monument aere perennius, "more lasting than

bronze." But in the end the fate of all human productions, even the most lasting, is oblivion. Ozymandias invited travelers to look upon his works and marvel. But those testaments to greatness had vanished long ago, consumed by the engulfing sands. Only broken fragments of his shattered ambition remained.

From this perspective, it is the evanescence of beauty, not its duration, that most captivates us. Still, we have looked to art, and to its primary modern domicile, the museum, to preserve these traces of mankind's adventures in time. That is one of the reasons that we at *The New Criterion* were so interested in exploring the subject of art museums in the contemporary world. For we sense that the museum, like so many other cultural institutions, is undergoing a process of mutation that may fundamentally alter its purpose. Many art museums may still look like the marmoreal palaces of yore, but increasingly, as the following essays remind us, their goals are in tension with the calm solidity of their galleries and pavilions.

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1 "The Future of Permanence in an Age of Ephemera: a Symposium on Museums" took place on October 21, 2016 in New York City. Participants were Bruce Cole, Eric Gibson, Marco Grassi, Roger Kimball, George Knight, Michael J. Lewis, Philippe de Montebello, James Panero, and Karen Wilkin. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the papers printed in this issue. For their help in making the symposium and this special art issue possible, the Editors would like to thank the Reynard's Run Charitable Fund, the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, and Bobbie Foshay. We are deeply grateful for their support.

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