

On How Not to Accelerate in Reverse Gear. Or, the Museum's Troubled Futurity, Considered.

Raqs Media Collective

"Presentomorrow can only be yesternow and that is already pastsentient fornevermore."

From the Founding Charter and Operation Manual of the Museum of Time Travel (Forever Forthcoming)

Every museum is a time machine with multiple pedals for acceleration, all moving only in reverse gear. Even a museum that addresses the contemporary immediately transforms the present into a packaged relic, and then you exit through the gift shop, again. This means that the museum of the future is somewhat of an oxymoron. A time machine that moves only into the past can hardly be expected to have a future, can it?

It is unrealistic to expect an apparatus that arose at a very specific moment in history when the need to collect, classify, and display as a means to exercise cognitive hegemony over the past and the present was paramount, to give up the fight to retain its power and become a form and a forum that can be all things to all people and for all purposes. That is not going to happen. So, we might as well pick and choose our battles. Let us think of all that can be done in the basements, gardens, attics, hothouses, storage spaces, parking lots, hat-checks, libraries and garbage bins of museums. And there is a lot to be done in all these places. This is where people who got to museum, and who work in museums, do the things that museum don't mandate. This is where the museum sits down and takes a breath, smokes a cigarette, sips a cup of tea, or stares absently at a wall that has nothing hung on it to see.

Most museums, at least the historic ones, obtain a lot of their collections from heaps of rubble. Archaeologists are the dumpster-divers, rag-pickers and waste-recyclers of prehistory and history. Their excavation sites are often the garbage-bins, ravaged ruins, kitchen-middens and burial-mounds of other cultures and other times. The museum sanitizes what is actually historic waste and ruins and puts it on edifying display, but that does not mean that what it shows is not the debris of a burnt and broken age. Even museums of technology, which often don a futuristic garb, are essentially monuments to machines that no longer work. Their charm lies in the failures that they hold up to the light.

As long as the museum remains a museum it cannot have the future that anyone other than museum directors will want it to have. Their job is to preserve and to

persevere, to keep the formaldehyde fresh, to stop the light from unsettling the chemistry of pickled time, to stop life in its tracks as it tries to make its way.

We have heard it said that ‘the future isn’t what it used to be’; accordingly, nor is the ‘museum of the future’ what it used to be any longer. How can a catalogue text be written for that which is as yet unknown, or a wall label drafted for an object that does not yet have a provenance? The museum of the future is an unborn ghost. It cannot yet return to haunt its own absence. The future isn’t necessarily a radiant new day, but then, nor is it necessarily a bleak night. Neither the utopians nor the Anthro-po-seen-and-been-there-and-done-that-dooms-dayists have the best stories on offer. Twilight can look a lot like dawn, and that is remarkably close to what we see when we look outside the windows of our time, or into the evenly lit interior of a museum. It’s a light that could be waxing, waning, either, neither, or, both.

Nor is the past what many wanted it to become. It is not a reverie, or a sanatorium for convalescents recovering from the ravages of time, or a place where rest cures for the rejuvenation of otherwise lost innocence are on offer. In many cultures and social contexts, the past is a surprisingly urgent and new battlefield, and arguments about what might have happened three thousand years ago is being used to settle today’s scores. New resentments feed on ancient glories; the museum is their pasture.

The spaceship hovering over a thoughtful planet in Andrei Tarkovsky’s film, *Solaris*, has a room that resembles a museum. A memorable episode in the film has one of its central characters levitating, along with a selection of floating objects from humanity’s heritage, as the camera’s eye moves across a Breughel’s winter landscape. Outside, the turbulent, sentient, crepuscular planet surges, like the surface of a troubled ocean. Transmitting signals that interfere with memory, produce hallucinations, and create a strange intimacy between dead objects and living beings.

Could we read this scene as a parable for what to do with museums once we stop worrying about their future relevance. The need to look intensely at a Breughel landscape will always remain. But that glance needs to be accompanied by an unmooring of relics from their vitrines. The past needs to float, to fly, to respond to mysterious transmissions from unknown worlds.

Once, we came across a reference to a terracotta cup salvaged from the more than 2000-year-old Antikythera shipwreck in a museum in Athens. The cup had the name *Pamphilos* — friend of all — inscribed on it. Our interest in shipwrecks and submarine excavations has also to do with how the international legal framework has developed over centuries, and how it has foregrounded the sea and all that lies in it, or could be found in it, as a kind of default universal commons. This is quite different from the history of the carving out of property claims made on land. Fluid realties produced fluid concepts.

And fluid concepts sometimes need to be imbibed, quite literally. Accordingly, amongst the things we have done, we made terracotta facsimiles after the form of the *Pamphilos* cup. These became goblets for the drinking of wine during a series of conversations hosted by us in Athens (wine is *pamphilos* too after all, beloved of all). The shipwrecked cup of universal friendship found a life more than two thousand years later, not as a relic, but as an object both of utility and metaphorical work, as the friend of all. We were making an epiphytic gesture towards a collective life, something that could refer to, and even remember, what a museum held in custody, but at the same time move away from its solely commemorative function.

As artists, we often enter Museums through their back entrances. We spend time in Museum basements, make friends with the people who act as custodians of their storage vaults. We talk to docents, guides, guards and the men and women who man ticket booths. The question that interests us as artists is whether or not an object found in the debris of another time, and relocated into a museum, can have another life. Sometimes we think we are time travelers hitching an unauthorized ride from the future into the past (or is it the other way around?), although our unstated goal is to make a brief detour into the present. We have to trick the accelerators and hack the reverse gear to make a sideways, transverse move possible. Sometimes this works, and sometimes it doesn't. But the memory of an occasional bad trip is never an excuse not to embark on another adventure. And so, we persist.

In the Museum of People's History in Manchester, close to Kropotkin's abandoned writing desk, we found a cardboard box with a single biscuit baked during the days of the Paris Commune. No one quite knew how to exhibit a soot-black sourdough square of calcified, mouldy biscuit. We had the biscuit scanned, 3D printed to yield a negative mould, and then baked new biscuits: clones, but not quite, of the biscuit of the Paris Commune. To make a mould, sometimes you have to break a mould, and so this mouldy biscuit became a conduit, not to another time, but to another sense of time.

Eventually, several batches of replicant Paris Commune were baked, served and bit into. They had a dry, salty, charcoal tang of a taste that improved considerably with the application of preserves and confit. The Paris Commune had once been a herald of a possible future. Consigned now to the past, it still bears an aura of what might yet be, or at least of what might have been. These are not futures. They are desires. And while desire is always predicated on what is not yet ready and available, it does not necessarily translate into what is to come. That depends. And so, does the future of the museum —on the ability to make choices with objects, attitudes, dispositions and actions so as to enable us to bake and then sink our teeth into the crust of time, to eat time, and quaff its fermented wine, rather than be consumed, or be eaten by time.