

Artland

Museum in motion

[\[in italiano\]](#)

I go outside... The magnificent chaos of the museum follows me and mingles with the battle of the street... We are and we move in the same vortex of the melange that we inflict as a torment on the art of the past.
Paul Valéry (1)

[24jul2002]

Many decades before the emergence of the critique of the museum institution coming from the 1960s political and artistic movements, Paul Valéry had already perceived the paradoxical coincidence of the classificatory order of the historicist exhibit and the fragmentation of the modern urban experience. One juxtaposes different artifacts following arbitrary ordering rules, the other destroys any sense of permanence through the fast consumption of temporary signs. Both participate to the capitalist system of production from two seemingly opposite viewpoints: while commerce needs the continuous upheaval of any established order, cultural institutions sponsor the faith in the renewal of the current system of production by trying to embrace in it all the cultural formations that preceded it. Works from the past are ordered following a linear progression as if a *continuous creation* could tie the past to the present without any disruption.

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Order and disorder, stability and impermanence reveal a substantial coincidence: both labeling objects and spreading information belong to the same authority that claims its right to construct an order and dismantle it at its own will, leveling historic artifacts and sale products within a dispossessed identity. Even the attempt to construct a symbolic collective aura for art can be related to the preservation of the system of production and exchange. Hubert Damisch, in a revealing essay, has written that the museum institution maintains a substantial coherence "...whether it is intended as mere *passage*, open to everything and everyone and where even the idea of a memory fades, or whether, on the other land, it closes in on itself like a *tomb* initially profaned but which preserves its secret intact". (2)

NOTE:

(1) Paul Valéry, "Le problème des musées" (1923), in *Oeuvres*, Paris, 1978, pp. 1290-1293. Text also quoted in Franco Rella, "The vertigo of the melange" in *Lotus 35*, 1982.
(2) Hubert Damisch, "The museum device, notes on institutional changes", in *Lotus 35*, 1982.

The symbolical conversion of the contemporary museum from the logic of production to the circulation of information with the spreading of spectacular exhibits and showcase buildings, does not change the control strategy that imposes prefabricated values, it simply makes it more sophisticated. By allowing access to *interactive extensions*, the contemporary exhibit gives the public the illusion to participate in the creative process while it subtly reiterates the practice of imposing a value and a hierarchy. In the ecstasy of hypercommunication, the individual involvement towards the art object is obliterated and all meanings are sacrificed to immediate access and economic exploitation: what is lost is the educational power of art and its capacity to function as a memory device that develops individual imagination.

The most intelligent contemporary critique of the traditional museum has avoided the illusory freedom of media communication in the attempt to overcome its authoritarian hierarchies. Many contemporary artists have instead proposed approaches to artworks that go beyond the assignment of a stable meaning. Their strategies include the (re)construction of multiple identities, the investment of the body in the making of objects and the acknowledgment of the changed meaning of an artifact with respect to the different settings in which it is placed. These artists have worked at *processes* that promote a more direct contact with the artworks but at the same time resist consumption by *delaying* perception in space and time. In doing this, they have reconsidered specific spatial contexts belonging to different cultures and times that could house alternative approaches to art: the pre-scientific private collection and its 'affectionate' siding of different displays (think of the work of Marcel Broodthaers), the artist studio, a work in progress that mixes multiple materials (the environments of Dieter Roth), the children playroom and its vital performance (the historic installations of Bruce Nauman and the more recent ones by Jason Rhoades and Thomas Hirschorn).



Everson Museum, IM Pei, 1968.

The value of Lawrence Davis's Children Interactive Gallery at the Everson Museum lies in a similar ability to develop an environment where the fruition of the artworks happens through their continuous transformation. His strategy, coming from a profound historic and artistic awareness, invites to *play* with the coordinates of art perception and this activity is able to translate in a consistent architectural space without losing the traces of the successive stages through which a exhibition goes in its set up. *Wunderkammer* in its ceramic section, *camera obscura* and theater dressing-room in the portrait area, construction site in the making but mostly *carnival* (in the meaning given by Bachtin) where established values are upset, the gallery acquires a disrupting force in relation to the Everson, the building that contains it. (3)

(3) The carnival, in Michail Bachtin literary essays, is the polyphonic structure of language in its liberating moments, taking place during collective festivities. Here, syntactic rules are obliterated and words can assume multiple meanings.

The Pei museum joins the monumentality of historic buildings with the neutrality of the Modernist 'white cube': on the one side it becomes a temple-repository that shelters and elevates art, on the other it is completely indifferent to the artworks contained in it and this detachment is functional to the perception of the artworks as commodities that cannot dwell permanently in any space but travel from show to show. The Everson is the spatialization of the aforementioned coincidence of impermanence and institution within capitalist culture. Davis instead, supported by the innovative program devised by curator Marion Wilson, constructs an open framework where multiple activities can happen and artworks be recontextualised. There is no stable portrait identity nor fixed location for the ceramic pieces but only a *creative search* that immediately becomes representation and is visually projected through many openings and spatial devices (the windows, the gaps in the walls, the open joints between structure and cladding, the continuous reversal of interior and exterior space but also the transferal of images through video on the outside shell).

The search of the meaning of an artwork becomes immediately public, there is no gap between setting a display and perceiving a finished work but only *the exhibit of a work in the making*, an open conversation between the artifacts from the collections, the new works made in the gallery, their supports, the surrounding space, the little authors-actors and the museum visitors. The *kaleidoscopic* nature of the gallery makes the space unstable as if it were an illusionist fun house or a mirror labyrinth. The 'cheap' materiality of the wood frame stretches the boundaries of the new structure that seems not concluded and recalls many installations of American environmental art (Judd, Bladen, Nauman, Morris) as well as the early residential work of Frank Gehry and the 'nomadic' architecture of John Hejduk. By revisiting specific temporary architectures -the entertainment kiosk, the 'cabinet of curiosities', the panorama, the camera obscura- Davis's gallery recalls Walter Benjamin's search for ephemeral cultural forms of the near past instead of established typologies. (4)

The dialectics between open and enclosed, heavy and light, monumental and ephemeral that the gallery entertains with the Everson architecture is no simple opposition but creation of a new intermediate space that activates the museum. Down in the basement of Pei's opaque cube, there is a new pulsating heart that moves the museum holdings by inserting them in a new blood system. Objects, paintings, artifacts are displaced and participate to a new *ubiquitous* museum.

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(4) In the initial chapters of the Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin describes his work plan and quotes different contexts (the universal expositions, the panorama, the middle-class interior, etc.). See "Paris, capital of the nineteenth century" in *Reflections*, New York 1978, pp. 146-162.

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