GRASPING THE WORLD
THE IDEA OF THE MUSEUM

Edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago
Art is troublesome not because it is not delightful, but because it is not more delightful: we accustom ourselves to the failure of gardens to make our lives as paradisal as their prospects.


We begin this book with an observation by Robert Harbison that poignantly articulates not only one of the main aspirations for art, but also one of the main expectations for museums: that it (and they) would satisfactorily ground, establish, and transform our individual and collective lives. To place this hope or expectation on art, or, more generally, human artifice as such – rather than, for example, on religion – may be taken as one of the keystones in an overarching socio-economic system that distinguishes the post-Enlightenment age from the past. The beliefs that have constituted the core of ‘modernity’ rest upon certain assumptions about the nature of meaningful relationships between subjects and objects, between individuals or communities and the worlds they weave about themselves. It is our contention that the institution of the museum has for some time been essential to the fabrication and sustenance of this system of beliefs.

*Grasping the World* is a critical investigation of the modern European idea of the museum. But why *yet another* book about museums *now*? More has been written about museums in the past decade, it seems, than in the previous century. It is not easy to characterize this massively diverse body of work in any simple or singular way. A lot of it deals with contemporary museological shortcomings and inadequacies. Much of it in recent years has treated the museum as basically a form of infotainment, and as a ‘technical’ problem of packaging and dispensing various kinds of cultural information to targeted audiences. Often, questions of technology are imagined to be pre-, post-, or extra-political, with institutional problems commonly framed so that they might appear to be ‘solved’ by yet more refined imagineering, marketing, or more subtly prefabricated ‘interactive’ opportunities for audiences – in short, by turning up and fine-tuning the fascination and dramaturgy.

A good deal of other writing, also addressing current problems, has involved museological ‘content’ and the activities of professional ‘content-providers’ (art historians, curators, and others) and deals with redressing perceived imbalances in the institutional portrayal of racial, national, ethnic,
class, or gender groups. The general concern has been with teaching museums to become better representatives of a wider (multi)cultural world. Yet virtually all of the recent literature treats this concern as if it were a classic map-territory problem of representational adequacy. The most common result has been to call for redress by more refined versions of conventional museum stagecraft, or by the revision, re-staging, or replacement of museum contents by different versions of the same thing, and by more ‘accurate’ and nuanced representations.

Many solutions to the perceived problems may have perpetuated the same problems but under different guises. They invariably share a fundamental thesis – that a museum is primarily a representation, an artifact as ‘natural’ as the ‘specimens’ it preserves, rather than an institution for the construction, legitimization, and maintenance of cultural realities. A principal corollary of this assumption is that representational ‘adequacy’ consists of a synecdochal (a part standing in for the whole) relationship between an exhibition’s contents and a wider world of cultural objects and social practices. And, conversely, the assumption that an exhibition could represent that wider world in a meaningful way has been the prime justification for taking objects from the settings for which they were initially made and reassembling them for study and contemplation. These assumptions justify the institutional framing of objects as specimens.¹ As Nestor García Canclini and other contributors to this volume argue in detail, such assumptions also masquerade the constructedness of the museum frame as ‘natural’ historical truth or consensus. Most museumgoers are not prepared (educated) to analyze both the framework and its contents, with the result that museums, as informal educational institutions, perpetuate racial/ethnic/national/gender stereotypes. Yet, in the modern museum setting, responsibility for the perpetuation of untenable beliefs and assumptions is distributed across a spectrum of individuals ranging from trustees to curators and educators – with the frequent result that the perpetuation appears to be nobody’s ‘fault’.

The extraordinary fact is that we live in a world in which virtually anything may be exhibited in a museum, and in which virtually anything can be made to function as a museum, often through little more than verbal designation. At this juncture, it is often difficult to distinguish museum practices from the entertainment, tourist, and heritage industries; department stores and shopping malls; the art market; and even artistic practices. In such a world, the question of ‘representation’ (adequate or otherwise) is, to say the least, very complex indeed. The distinctiveness of the museum as an institution, and of museology as a practice, has come to be conceived as a mode of representation that deploys and disseminates knowledge. And many museums, aside from their ideological usefulness, are successful because they are good business investments, in every sense of that term.
But this is also a time when critical studies of the museum have begun taking up the arduous and painstaking task of trying to understand and account historically for the evident *indispensability* and universal dissemination of this remarkable and uncanny European invention to so many different cultures, societies, and political regimes around the world. Important critiques of these social practices by a number of writers are included in the present collection of essays. It is not our intention, however, to fetishize museums or to rescue museology from its currently compromised position. The institution of the museum stands at the intersection of a wide variety of social, cultural, scientific, and political developments in every corner of the world. There may be upwards of some 100,000 museums in the world today, of every conceivable form, size, and mission – to the extent that it is fair to claim both that we live in a world in which virtually anything may reasonably be exhibited in a museum, and that virtually anything may be made to serve as a museum.

It may be more useful, today, to ask not 'What is a museum?', but rather 'When is a museum?' Our principal aim in this anthology is to plot a critical, historical, and ethical understanding of the practices centered on what we commonly understand today about museums as a key force in the fabrication and maintenance of modern identity. More than a genre, and more than simply one institution on a par with others, museums are essential sites for the fabrication and perpetuation of our conception of ourselves as autonomous individuals with unique subjectivities. William Pietz argues persuasively that aesthetics and fetishism are interrelated and complementary Enlightenment inventions. In this case, the origins and development of art history and museology are significantly compounded, rendering even more problematic the professional practices that we normally take for granted, namely the labeling and classifying operations that museum curators routinely perform.

The purpose of this volume, then, is to provide a critical understanding of the origins and history of museums. Inseparable from a critical understanding of museums are the crises of and challenges to European self-knowledge resulting from a half-millennium-long global expansion of experience through conquest and commerce. Consequently, the inseparability of museology, colonialism, and imperialism (and their consequent moral, social, and epistemological effects and affordances) is a central issue for critical historians to investigate. More than simply one among many ‘ideological apparatuses’ in the institutional arsenal of contemporary society, museums worldwide pervade many of the social practices, both institutionalized and informal, that determine the perception and function of objects and environments, no less than of ourselves as social subjects.

We share with many of our contributors the view that there is much more to museums than the documenting, monumentalizing, or theme-parking of
identity, history, and heritage. Though they are commonplace in our cultural landscape, museums are far from ‘natural’. Nor does it remedy our perception of museums simply to label them ‘cultural’, because the terms of such a discussion are tautological. For what does ‘culture’ signify besides the stuff that museums collect? In general, the power and persuasiveness of the museological construct – its artifice, if you will – is inseparable from that of art. And the gradual invention and expansion of the category ‘art’ to encompass all ‘cultures’ has been a crucial instrument by which the history of the world’s peoples have been retroactively (re)written in the five centuries since European expansion reached global proportions.

The idea of the museum

If the walls of the museums were to vanish, and with them their labels, what would happen to the works of art that the walls contain, the labels describe? Would these objects of aesthetic contemplation be liberated to a freedom they have lost, or would they become so much meaningless lumber?


Art, in the modern sense that the word acquired in the eighteenth century but not earlier, has been the correlative and indispensible means by which the modern Euro-American subject and its consequent notions of agency have fabricated, sustained, and transformed the rest of the world. The success of museums devoted to history, heritage, and identity is based on a particular kind of object – the artifact – and certain characteristic modes of stagecraft. *Grasping the World* deals with this complex phenomenon. Museum objects are staged or framed to be ‘read’ in a variety of ways, or in ways that privilege their aesthetic significance (as works of ‘art’) or their documentary status (as relics or as ‘scientific’ evidence of a time, place, people, spirit or mentality) or, commonly, some combination of both. In any case, as an *evidentiary* institution, the museum’s power and persuasiveness has rested in no small measure upon the deployment of objects of oscillating determinacy. However they are framed, museum objects – whether works of fine art, scientific specimens, mechanical inventions, ethnographic artifacts, fetishes, relics, or what have you – function as diagnostic devices and modular measures for making sense of all possible worlds and their subjects.

Collections of objects are, moreover, framed, opposed, superimposed, and transformed by the discursive practices of aesthetic philosophy, art history, history, psychology, anthropology, and ethnography – all of which are grounded in and follow from the epistemological principles, categories, and assumptions of museology. For the museum is not only a cultural artifact made up of other cultural artifacts; museums serve as theater, encyclopedia,
and laboratory for simulating (demonstrating) all manner of causal, historical, and (surreptitiously) teleological relationships. As such, museums are ‘performances’ – pedagogical and political in nature – whose practitioners are centrally invested in the activity of making the visible legible, thereby personifying objects as the representations of their makers, simultaneously objectifying the people who made them and, in a second order reality that is part of the same historical continuum, objectifying the people who view made objects in their recontextualized museum settings.

How has this state of affairs come about? Museums define (exhibit) relationships by naming agencies and displaying objects. While it is widely accepted that the French Revolution launched the first major state museum, the idea that materialized as the Louvre predated it. Elsewhere, all over Europe and its extensions overseas, public museums were formed on the basis of royal and aristocratic private collections and furnishings in order to fashion citizens in new nation-state formations. The various social practices that accomplished such effects antedate the modern museum as we know it and may be seen most readily in earlier European habits of collecting. The birth of the art museum as a modern institution was also enabled, if not precipitated, by the eighteenth-century rise of aesthetics as the philosophical discourse framing the production and reception of art. Crudely stated, aesthetic discourse was a general extension and transformation of activities rooted in sense experience that had long been associated in both theory and practice with the devotional function of religious images. In its European context, the transformation of longstanding religious routines into (allegedly) secular set of practices revolved around subjective experiences with art as such.

Any museological collection is, by definition, only made possible by dismembering another context and reassembling a new museological whole. The social practice of publicly viewing art in museums that evolved around the turn of the nineteenth century simultaneously atomized social exchange at the level of individual experience and redefined community in terms of the same practice. The emergence of the modern, state-supported, public museum and the modern categorization of certain cultural artifacts as art coincides exactly with the paradigm shift that engaged Michel Foucault’s attention, yet neither he nor others have studied the key role of museums in the ‘secularization’ of society. Foucault pointed to the birth of a hybrid, ‘power/knowledge’, that makes use of disciplinary forms of social control rather than of brute force. The European invention of the museum has fundamentally transformed the world itself: this volume foregrounds the ongoing consequences of museology as an epistemological technology and its allied practices and institutions. In a very concrete sense then, this book is a critical investigation into the role of museums as staged environments that
elicit our selves and locate and orient our desires within the trajectories of an
imagined past.

The function of the museum as part of a discursive formation in the
Foucauldian sense is as yet insufficiently understood and under-theorized.
Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, in a series of widely influential publications
(one of which is included here), have pointed to the ‘civilizing rituals’ of
modern museum experience. Acting on their insights, this volume aims to
open up the theoretical discussion of the social transition from a predominantly
dynastic and religious to a secular social organization that museums effectively
engineered and maintain today. The story of this transformation is complex.
As editors who anticipate further studies, we seek and recommend ways out
of modernity – not by breaking with the past, because that is an unrealizable
and naïve desire, but by thinking historically and critically about and beyond
such artificially constructed, modern categories as ‘art’, ‘science’, and ‘religion’.

The organization of this anthology

The subject we want to explore is the extraordinary European idea of the
museum and its many consequences (on and beyond that continent) in the
past and present. This book is about the palpable idea of museums: it is
emphatically not an architectural or institutional history of museums or
museum collections, nor does it deal directly with connoisseurship or the
conservation of objects.

It is the tangible result of continuing discussions by two art historians
working on either side of the period that customarily establishes the basis
for modern discussions about art, namely the Enlightenment. In a very real
sense, Grasping the World is an ongoing dialogue crystallized here momentarily
as a book. In our role as editors of this volume of reprinted and newly
commissioned essays, we attempt to provide critical guidance to readers in
the form of brief introductions and transitions as well as suggestions for
reading certain texts in juxtaposition. It is not an easy task to translate into
print the dynamic spirit of the many debates, discussions, conferences,
workshops, and pedagogical collaborations that provided the germination
of the present volume. What we hope to do here is to clear a space for
rumination and to encourage further critical observation and discussion, by
providing clues rather than blueprints, and questions and goads rather than
pat answers or solutions. Our joint sense of this book was affected by many
different experiences, including individual and joint seminars, lectures,
debates, conferences jointly organized or attended, the writing of several
other books by each of us, and by our continuing to walk museums around
the world. At times in the past our discussions have led to the pen touching
paper or to one or both of us speaking nascent ‘pieces’ of what this book has now become. Each of us has wrestled with the crucial problem of what form an effective and useful critical historiography of museum practices would best take. Our concern here has been with finding ways to responsibly articulate the diversity, richness, and heterogeneity of museological practices over several centuries without succumbing to the temptations of grand historicist schemes. But our aim is not simply to craft a conventional historical genealogy which, in Krzysztof Pomian’s words, avoids ‘both the Scylla of empty generalizations and the Charybdis of mountains of unrelated facts’.

The role of museums in modern societies is complex enough, in our view, to require a kind of organization and a mode of writing that weaves together the general and the particular. *Grasping the World* is thus not a consecutive history but an interleaved series of case studies and meta-commentaries, as well as texts that the editors believe can aid the reader in locating the discursive formation that enables museums to perform their agency in contemporary society. This book works with and against the grain of the literature in the fields of museology and art history. It consists of reprinted texts published in the last four decades and several new articles that we commissioned, introduced by jointly authored critical commentaries. The collection addresses readers within many areas of the humanities and social sciences, including museum professionals. Each chapter represents a perspective overlapping with the perspectives on the subject offered by adjacent chapters.

The book’s sections proceed roughly (but not exclusively) chronologically, from the early modern period and the beginnings of global commerce in the sixteenth century to the present. Each section contains both theoretical essays and historical studies, interspersing earlier writings with more recent publications. Some directly address issues raised in other essays in the same section. We have often juxtaposed analyses or observations dealing with the same institution or the same issue. The selection and particular grouping of essays is, unavoidably, arbitrary beyond a certain extent. Many more worthy studies have been published than appear here. Our basic intention is to stimulate individual readers and especially readers in professional and classroom settings to examine the active agency that museums have – the societal and epistemological effects that they can be said to ‘perform’ through their viewing subjects. The arguments themselves were produced within often very highly charged environments of controversy and debate at various times and in specific places around the world. In their present context, these texts are deployed in juxtaposition to a series of editorial commentaries that both link and mark differences between texts, and serve as catalysts and workpoints for further discussion. At the same time, each essay is intended to function as an anamorphic patch in the overall collection of papers, reading the collection of texts (and thereby the narrative histories explicit or covert
within) otherwise, as a paratext woven in, through, and against the collection constituting the anthology, to enable our readers to consider the consequences of museums and museology today on their own terms. Taken as a whole, the volume articulates a critical historiography of the institution of the museum and of museology — and inevitably, of art history itself.

One of our central concerns is with exploring alternatives to familiar ‘histories’ of the institution that are written either in a singular magisterial voice or in a deceptively anonymous ‘It happened that …’ mode that masks its own views. In short, the portrayal of the author’s subject position ‘outside’ history is imaginary — a projection (not unlike a slide cast onto a screen) — that actually provides the frame for the narrative itself. That which is staged offstage — the historian or collector (the man and his work) — is in fact never not a member of the cast. This real/imaginary dualism is a problem whose timely investigation is one of our chief motivations in publishing this volume. Our framing commentaries can be neither internal nor external to the study: thus they not only frame the work, they also ‘square it’, as Derrida once aptly put it. The resulting collection is unavoidably museological in its own way. The volume provides a way of critically seeing museums not in isolation from other social productions and effects, but as components in a larger matrix of institutions and professions.

It is often difficult, today, to imagine a truly different world, and to imagine othernesses not already transformed into positively or negatively marked variants of our own identities. What follows is nonetheless an attempt to foreground what modernity’s visibility routinely veils. But this is to get too far ahead of the story too soon. Let’s begin with the multiple historical origins and motivations of museums. The persistence of the museum idea can aid us in not reducing the past to a form of the present, and the other to a form of the same. Both strategies, of course, constitute the very fabric of museological, historiographic, and art historical practices’ with their virtually irresistible gravity and fascination.

We begin with a look at some of the general ways in which, in museums and collections, memory is given form, and in which objects come to serve roles in the generation of narratives of origins and descent, and of commensurabilities and hierarchies. To what ‘idea’ have museums responded? Is that idea a retrospective articulation of what museums appear in the present to practice? Is a museum an answer or a question? Fact or fiction? An effect or a proposition mooted?

NOTES


