

The Goddess Muse in A Beauty Centre

/ Yeo Chee Kiong

On a midsummer afternoon, the golden sun creeps slowly over the ancient stone tiles of Piazza Della Signoria. Time strides serenely across the scales between the crevices. It is still too early for the dinnertime crowd. One can choose any restaurant along the square in which to enjoy authentic, delicious seafood pasta. Facing Michelangelo's David that has stood there for centuries, the taste of clams lingers between the lips and teeth. The red wine swirls gently in the long-stemmed glass, the slanting shadows gradually thickening and clinging to a shifting orange-yellow halo-like gauze over the original gray marble.

A Scottish scholar has said that seventy percent of the great works of Renaissance art are in Italy, and seventy percent of those are preserved in the ancient city of Florence and its adjacent towns. Walking in the alley on foot is like walking into a virtual reality program that utilizes the history of Western art as its reference and was constructed during the Renaissance in Florence. The actual place duplicates the satisfaction of finding one Pokemon after another in a game on a mobile phone. The pleasure of slow living is in making a necessary but timely stop, stepping into the alley cafe to have a cup of Italian coffee. At this time and place, how to use the time given right now in exchange for the beauty that has existed here in the past is the sense of real existence with which digital life cannot compare. As travelers, it is easy to get caught up in Florence's daily life with an ostentatious traveling attitude. For local people, the travelers' stop has already become a part of their daily life. If the Muses had not resided here, time would move forward mercilessly forever, taking away all traces of beauty, and we would eventually only be able to transfer our conjecture and fancy through the beautiful verse that has been passed down by poets.

A Beauty Centre, as one of the day-to-day beauty affairs in the domain of contemporary life, adopts an open approach toward daily matters pertaining to beauty to enhance the beauty experience. Therefore, *Vague Vogue* has invited Professor Kao Chien-Hui, an art critic, to give an in-depth analysis of the beautiful daily life of the Muses in beauty parlours and offer insight into how to enter a superb daily experience with them, as a reference for daily life in the present.

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/ Prof Kao Chien-Hui

Original in Chinese, Translated by Tan Yen Peng

Foreword

I have written a few books that involve issues in the mechanism of art production and art spaces. These books include *Unsilent Words: Text and its Productive Context of Art Criticism*; *Biennale Fever – The Alternative Voice of Politics, Aesthetics and Institutes*; *ART – in the Name of XX*; *Rebellion in Silhouette: The New Myth of the Contemporary Artist*, and *Contemporary Art Production Line - Debates Between Creative Practice and Social Intervention* which I am currently still writing. Looking back, I find that I have a personal awareness of and interest in the system and space where art is produced. At the core of this line of inquiry is my belief that the establishment of an artwork is related to the structure of the art society. Aesthetics is inseparable from politics; even if we try to critique artworks from an aesthetics or art historical standpoint, we will not be able to eliminate the interference of ideology and cultural taste.

Housing exhibitions that carry aesthetics and social information, the art museum is the most authoritative space for authentication, among the art production mechanisms. Thomas Hobbes, a political philosopher from the Age of Enlightenment, once pointed out that Plato's ideas were born from the mistakes of Athenian democracy, and that Augustine's philosophy explained why Rome was invaded by barbarians, while Hobbes, in an era of dilemma, had to find a way to explain the British civil war. Our interpretations of human predicament differ when the space-time environment is different. In this sense, what sort of implication would we see in the way the mode of contemporary art production and the ethics of institutional sphere are formed?

In showcasing and authenticating artworks, the museum's state of alienation remains, and it does not become more sophisticated simply because it is the Muses' Temple. Instead, it is given a mask of power by its exhibition and marketing mechanisms. In its intervention in the bureaucratic structure of the capitalists, laborers, administrative service providers, and resource dominators, it reveals the art society as a mini-theater and provides the trending directions of cultural taste. Pierre Bourdieu, a French contemporary cultural theorist, looked at the issue of the social construction of taste by examining the field of cultural construction and the production of taste. On the other hand, the institutional theory of the American cultural theorist Arthur Danto stated that the "artworld" is exactly the location where cultural construction happens. He considered the production of Art within the range of social behavior and narrowed it down from the anthropological concern of an individual's social interaction to the formation and building of the art institution. Whether from the perception of anthropology or sociology, the existence of the art museum represents the cultural hierarchy of a place. Its exhibitions, collections, research, and promotional works also show the

standard of its art production, and the way forces and power are deployed within its art community.

In the spring of 2018, I met Singaporean artist Yeo Chee Kiong who was at the National Taiwan University of the Arts as a visiting assistant professor. I had the opportunity to know his works and further understand some of the thoughts behind his artistic creations. The brilliance of critical artworks requires that they are not overtly straightforward; even better, they should be ambiguous and have an openness that allows for the possibility of various readings. Yeo Chee Kiong first exhibited his *A Day Without A Tree* at the National Museum of Singapore in 2007. Different versions of the same work were shown again, twice, in the Singapore Art Museum in 2008 and 2014. Between the exhibitions, the core idea of the work shifted from the original inquiry of the authority of the museum to the issue of the institution of artistic production, which later developed into a quest for the relationship between “beauty” and “institution”. In art production, which includes the scheme for judging and defining beauty, the system of evaluation, and the mechanisms of collection, the museum is the largest and the most powerful processing factory, while the entity that has appreciated most in value is the art market with the price system. However, there is also a huge, invisible force at play; that is, the cultural capital that drives the art society to move forward.

Yeo Chee Kiong’s *A Day Without A Tree* is a work created for the “Art-On-Site Programme” of the National Museum of Singapore. The organizer allowed the participating artists to establish dialogue with the museum’s architectural structure and expected that the artists would be able to bring changes to the viewers’ impressions of the museum. In this site-specific exchange, Yeo transformed the bricks and the columns under the rotunda of the museum, turning them into a live body in a melting and flowing state.¹ Later in 2014, at the Singapore Art Museum, Yeo “dissolved” the classical Greek columns at the entrance of the building’s special exhibition hall “The Secret Room”, turning them into a pool of white liquid. So, what changes does the artist expect in the audience’s impressions of the museum? As a poetic and ambiguous artistic expression, *A Day Without A Tree* is an open-ended, non-declarative riddle. Any imaginings and controversies that develop with the work thereafter will reflect the scale to which the museum as a cultural mechanism is viewed.

In this Temple of the Muses, we ought to find flowing language that is supposed to be amusing. After the *A Day Without a Tree*, Yeo replaced the authoritative art museum with the secular, Pop-Art-flavored *A Beauty Center*. He compared and linked events in the museum to activities in beauty salons such as “love for beauty,” “beautification,” “reformation,” and “beauty marketing.” However, in the forum for his exhibition "*A Beauty Centre at Jinshan*", held at the Juming Museum in Taiwan, the focus of the discussion was diverted to gender issues and the objectification of women. In art production, we have seen the associations

¹ See exhibition brochure *A Day Without a Tree* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2007)

between artistic taste and the objectification of women in Peter Watson's book *From Manet to Manhattan: The Rise of the Modern Art Market*. Watson cited the example of the Babylonian marriage market in 500 BC, which he considered to be the earliest example of the auctioning of "beauty" according to the taste of a class of people. In ancient times, marriage was a business transaction; rich men went to the market to bid on and purchase a pretty wife, and women were treated as a kind of property. In the auction, the bidding price of a pretty woman would have to include her sisters' "cost of the unsellable" as the uglier or flawed girls' "future dowry". Therefore, the increase in the value of "beauty" had to include many other unseen or unrelated costs.²

So what kind of discussions would be opened up in the art world when the Goddess Muses enter and settle in the beauty center? In fact, the discussions related to the exhibition "A Beauty Centre at Jinshan" evaded the issues surrounding the "production system of the taste for beauty", while the artist seems to have learned to accept the open-ended interpretation of his creative scheme. In May 2018, Yeo asked me whether my opinion expressed in the article "Who Killed the Art Museum", collected in the book *Rebellion in Silhouette*, had changed after a lapse of 12 years and whether I could participate in another of his projects that use media as a carrier and related to the "reflection of beauty". I am therefore able to review, in retrospect, whether the mode of production and the ethics of the institutional sphere for contemporary art have become cruder or more civilized from the 1990s to the 2010s. Again, I will leave the answer to the readers.

"Who Killed the Art Museum?" was first written in the late 1990s. It is divided into four sections: the museum as a public sphere; the competition for software and hardware competencies between museums; the prevalence of "Theme Parks" and "Blockbuster Shows"; and lastly, the dilemma of the populist's versus the elitist's stands. The mid-1990s was once the golden era of "Theme Parks" and "Blockbuster Shows" in the art world. Just like the unique character of the Tyrannosaurus from the movie *Jurassic Park*, the era provided a kind of entertainment aesthetic that was based on a huge, exaggerated, and violent visual experience. Always agile and wilful, these creatures appear in scenes filled with archaeological fossils and *sci-fi* creatures, catching people off-guard, making them yell with fear and yet unwilling to leave the scene. The audience praised the movie while still in shock and would not go home without snatching a bunch of plastic souvenirs outside the cinema to keep up with the trends.

"Who killed the Art Museum?" was once the theme of a forum. It asked questions such as, what does the contemporary art museum want? Who makes decisions about the bearings and directions of the contemporary art museum? What kind of artists and audiences does it appeal to? What kind of new links does it make between academic research and entertainment? What new relationship does it have with popular culture? Furthermore, do changes in a museum's administrative structure lead to changes in its operation? And, how does the

² Peter Watson, *From Manet to Manhattan: The Rise of the Modern Art Market* (Random: NY, 1992), p.46

Exhibition unit become more important than the Collection and the Research departments? Should regional art museums have individual cultural missions, or should they be allowed autonomy and free competition? These problems have placed the "Art Museum" beyond the boundaries of the "Temple of Muses", making it a public forum where opinions on politics, culture, society, economy, and education could occur together.

When the National Museum of Singapore, who organized the "Art-On-Site Programme", called for artists to dialogue with the museum's architectural structure in 2007, they were hoping for the artists to transform the viewers' impressions of the museum, but were they expecting a certain kind of answer? By 2018, many art museums scurried to hold biennales with themes that brought discussions across the fields of politics, culture, society, and economics; this turned the art museum into a public forum and dissolved our image of the traditional art museum. But, after the traditional art museum is transformed, what would the space that houses formal art be like? Yeo has made an extension from the Muses Temple to the secularized and popularized world of media and entertainment, seemingly making an allegory of the production of the art society in the future. As for the discourse raised in "Who Killed the Art Museum" which I wrote some time ago, it shall, for the time being, serve as a two-way, intertextual reference to the issues.

Who Killed the Art Museum?

The Museum as a Public Space

From a humanist point of view, knowing the garden of delights and the concept of Utopia from the classics would allow us to see, when facing today's art museums, human beings' needs and desires under different social structures. However, if the Exhibition and Collection of the contemporary art museum do not compile the aesthetic experience or social experience of an era well, it may possibly face difficulties in its research and in promoting ideas if changes and complications happen too rapidly. It may then lose its educational function gradually, and even become a free, comfortable entertainment venue that does not require mental work.

If, today, we continue to think of the "art museum" as a holy temple, seeing it as a place for spiritual and religious worship, or a sanatorium for cleansing the soul, then we apparently have failed to identify the museum's new spirit of collecting - it is one of boastfulness. This trend forces us to gradually accept the value of new collections of daily objects that appear in art museums. The tangible collections include permanent artworks, documentation and archives, cultural and educational program files, and other tangible materials, while the intangible collections include the active artists, portable and mobile artworks, existing people, units or groups willing to give support and sponsorship, and other changing or mutable

elements. This agglomeration places the contemporary art museum at a transactional position between popularity and marginality within contemporary society. It is an extremely controversial cultural sphere of power.

In the last 50 years, the social function of the museum has been clearly transformed and new ideas emerge every generation. In the 1950s, under the influence of the Hermeneutic Approach, the function of the museum was to provide stimulation for the masses and to challenge existing definitions. The museum was no longer a “cram school”; audiences have to reread and rediscover new historical meanings according to their own experiences. In the 1970s, art museums entered a period of eco-intervention. The French museologist Georges Henri Riviere proposed a new concept of the ecology of the art museum, where there is an integration of the three elements of the building, the collection, and the public. His eco-museum movement advocated the use of natural or existing resources to create a treasury of the cultural history of places and emphasized the public’s learning of local histories. The eco-museum is suitable for the suburbs; the recent idea to reuse unutilized historical spaces and collaborate with local industries mainly derived from such a concept. This concept has further expanded to towns that had fallen behind in development, and many became camps for cultural militant action in the communities during the mid-1980s. Later, Chicago's Cultural Action, together with artists who were involved in realizing the dream of community construction, would extend and usher this movement into the field of alternative spaces. Other than that, some parts of developing countries are still involved in the showcase of subjects such as anti-drug, anti-violence, and campaigns for sexually transmitted diseases. This movement is recognized by artists with a social consciousness. Some major avant-garde international exhibitions of the new century have even had special exhibitions of their contributions to the research of nature and social ecology.

Between 1965 to 1995 are the 30 years during which the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States had shown most support for contemporary art. Many important contemporary American artists benefited from this official aid and created artworks on a non-profit basis. After 1989, culture was no longer an important ideological weapon in the Cold War, and there were even cultural debates in the United States because of several pieces of artwork with provocative religious and moral themes. After the 1990s, there was a gradual reduction of trust in and official support for the arts. In 1995, grant support for individual visual artists was canceled totally. By this point, a new era of art galleries and art museums had gradually taken shape. At the same time, the ages of capitalism and information have arrived together in the art world.

In terms of business survival, the art world’s reach for the support of high-tech enterprises has also changed the way artworks make adaptations. In the mid-1990s, following the trend of new technology, some history museums, art museums, and cultural centers began to pay attention to information on new technology. Promoting "art and technology", the emphasis was placed on electronic information, sounds, lights, and visual effects. Art museums were turned into places for the showcase of science and technology, while humanist interpretations

were added to the written texts. In this way, the art museum was put forward as a site for educational purposes. Exhibitions of science and technology were particularly popular on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. In fact, there was more emphasis on the use of technological media in the themes or contents of some biennales in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan than in Europe. Technological media was taken as an indicator for measuring progress.

Compared with the new Asian art museums' emphasis on the future, continental art museums paid more attention to historical memory. For more than over a decade, art galleries in Europe have tended to focus on paying homage to and preserving history. The Nordic art museums have long been paying attention to this cultural function of their institutions. Sweden even has an open-space art museum that was originally a site of traditional farming, while Norway has also been increasing the number of labour museums to commemorate their history in industrial production and to showcase the modernization process of its agro-industrial transformation. In addition, regions such as North America, Europe, and Israel have placed special emphasis on human experiences and ethnic memories such as historical battles and massacres. Many memorial halls have been established and some exhibitions often use this as a theme. France and the United Kingdom frequently make use of art exhibition spaces converted from old buildings for the purpose of memorial services for the Second World War. Some European art museums believe that cultural institutions should assume the social function of healing historical trauma, and frequently turn historical wounds and injuries into aesthetic experiences. Although the emerging contemporary art museums have put forth statements to "go local and think global", the emerging art museums in the East Asia region are actually more focused on achieving internationality, believing that cross-regional, cross-disciplinary, or international activities and the intervention of international art personalities could enhance international reputation. And whether it is increasing the functions of social transformation, the promotion of new technology, or the retrospection of historical memory, art museum operators are always capable of finding the right cultural rhetoric and advance with the times, as they position themselves between a "regional" spirit and an ambition to go "international".

These factors such as the time period, geography and cultural policy have little by little changed the function and content of the museum as a public cultural sphere. The commercialization of the contemporary art museum is especially an important turning point in the art scene of the new century. Besides the surface changes in management methods, the traditional structure of the contemporary art museum has also been transformed, while history, knowledge, art, aesthetics, leisure, and entertainment all come together to give rise to new values. At the beginning of the 21st century, attempts to define the art museum appeared frequently in non-academic journals such as newspapers and magazines for the masses, demonstrating fully that the publicness of art museums has become a new topic of popular culture.

Battle Between Museums: Hardware VS Software

Entering the 21st century, the most hyped news about art museums was their hardware battles. In recent years, many art museums have been busy catching up with fashion and modernization and went on with plans to renovate and improve the appearance of their buildings. A large number of new or emerging art museums strove to capture the media's and the public's attention with new architectural features. And when the "art museum's stylish structure" became the most attractive "permanent collection" of the "art museum", the architects then went on to replace the artists in the museum and were treated as the most popular "visual artists" of the era.

In New York in the fall of 2000, the newspaper *The New York Times* pointed out: "The lineup of fall shows suggests that museum professionals, driven by the desire to be financially secure, wildly popular or socially relevant, opt for one of two alternatives: exhibitions that look like upscale stores, or exhibitions that look like historical society displays."³ Following that, when the British Tate re-opened, and many art museums were expanded or were rebuilt one after another in the millennium year, some commentators also observed that the newly renovated art museum attracts the public with its architectural features; they care about the hardware – the building - more than the collection. Fundamentally, the modernization of the museum's own appearance seems to have gradually forced academic scholarship to take a backseat. *The New York Observer* also made a comment on the renovation plan proposed by the Guggenheim Museum in Lower Manhattan, pointing out that the Guggenheim is no longer a stringent art institution as it "has no aesthetic standards and no aesthetic agenda. It has completely sold out to a mass-market mentality that regards the museum's own art collection as an asset to be exploited for commercial purposes."⁴

The Guggenheim Museum's rise in the artworld was marked by its collection of *The Era of Non-Objective Painting*. According to John L. Davis's biography of Guggenheim, in 1944, the renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright proposed the museum's building plan to Solomon Guggenheim, and Guggenheim thought that the plan was rather visionary. However, it was not until 16 years later, when both of them had passed away and many things had changed, that the rather controversial round, spiral architecture was finally built on the 87th Street of New York. Although it also houses many masterpieces of the twentieth century, its greatest function is providing "cultural activities" that celebrities love. As for its most attractive artwork, it is the art museum's own architectural form. In this way, from the 1960s onward, the Guggenheim initiated the trend of treating the museum's outward appearance as the artwork and the museum's function as a cultural and entertainment event center.

Among the Guggenheim branches, the most eye-catching and enviable is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. However, what matches the reputation of the museum is not any masterpiece from its collection nor something from their featured major shows, but Frank

³ See "What Museums Want," *New York Times*, March 12, 2000. (Retrieved from: December 2000, Visual Arts Archives, ArtsJournal Visual Arts: Daily Arts News, accessed April 25, 2019, <http://www.artsjournal.com/visualarts/visualarts1200.shtml>)

⁴ See "Three-Ring Museum", *New York Observer*, December 6, 2000. (Retrieved from: December 2000, Visual Arts Archives, ArtsJournal Visual Arts: Daily Arts News, accessed April 25, 2019, <http://www.artsjournal.com/visualarts/visualarts1200.shtml>)

O. Gehry – the very architect who designed and made the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao a local tourist attraction. The Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum in the University of Minnesota also invited Gehry to design its new building in 1993. The collection of this museum has been based on American Pop Art and consumer products since the 1960s. Because of the prestigious reputation of both Frank Gehry and the Guggenheim Bilbao, the museum carries no cultural burdens and has chosen an exotic nickname for itself, claiming that it is the “Baby Bilbao”. In fact, Gehry's architecture itself is a super-large site-specific artwork. He went on to build a number of arts and cultural event centers which have all become important tourist attractions. These include the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and the Pritzker Music Pavilion and the BP Pedestrian Bridge at the Millennium Park in Chicago (completed in 2004).

The "Gehry phenomenon" has allowed the art of architecture to cross over to the avant-garde field of visual arts. The exteriors of the art museums in the new century have not only become the focus of the art world but have indeed made famous many art museum architects. They are responsible for making the art museums world-famous for their spatial structures, and propelling art museums to become tourist landmarks. The visitors who take pictures with the building in the courtyard are more excited than the viewers who scrutinize the artworks in the museum. However, the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburg has put forward an alternative approach. The museum is eight stories high, and there is nothing unconventional about its exterior design. Instead, it is an ordinary building of classical granite stone. Except for a large portrait of Andy Warhol with his shocking, electrified white hair at the entrance to the middle gate, the exterior of the museum is much like a bank or a high-class hotel. The architect of the Warhol Museum, Richard Gluckman, is very clear in his intention to present "an ordinary museum that belongs to you." In terms of the internal functions, he focused on presenting Warhol's works, and in terms of the spatial treatment, he made people feel as if they have entered The Factory – Warhol's grand art showroom. Andy Warhol's reputation is without doubt greater than Richard Gluckman's; as an architect designing a museum for a superstar, Gluckman has accomplished his task just so appropriately without stealing the limelight.

The recent phenomenon of museums to rebuild or renovate their buildings based on the idea of "the bigger the better" and "the emptier the nicer" has inevitably drawn criticism from experts. The opinion is that most of these buildings are too huge for no good reason since their sizes do not match their collections. Often, it is the financial groups or rich directors who pick the architects as a way to satisfy their own taste or as a gesture of wealth. In so doing, the museum's hardware – the spatial structure itself – becomes the largest piece of artwork, while the masterpieces inside the museum become wall decorations. Take the famous Chinese architect I. M. Pei for example; he has designed countless buildings in his life, and the glass pyramid built for the Louvre in France is especially famous in the art world. Although there was dissidence during the period of its construction, but due to the large number of artworks in the Louvre available to match different spaces, the new wing added was well incorporated into the main building quickly, and soon made its name as the famous new entrance to the Louvre. However, in the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art designed for Cornell University, he had instead put his unique “Building of Pei” spatial

concept into practice. Because it was a university art museum designed by a celebrity international architect, a lot of prestige was added to the university collection. However, external exhibitors who are showing works that do not belong to the university's collection will probably need to learn the art of cutting one's feet to fit smaller shoes – they will need to find ways to match their exhibits with the now huge reputation of the museum.

Besides the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa had also appointed three contemporary architects one after another: Eliel Saarinen, I. M. Pei, and Richard Meier. The unit that was originally only an art club in 1916 was elevated to the status of a regional landmark of an "Art Museum". The building was originally built in 1948 by its first architect Saarinen. After 18 years, in 1966, I. M. Pei was invited to extend the building due to the lack of space. In the mid-1980s, they ran out of space again, and Meier, who was involved in building the High Museum in Atlanta and the Getty Center in Los Angeles was engaged. As a museum dedicated to mainly sculptures, the three buildings by the three famous master architects naturally become the super-large installation art that established the place as a landmark. At the Seattle Art Museum, an alternative strategy was employed to resolve this battle of the hardware and the software between museums. Ever since the artist Jonathan Borofsky erected the 48-foot high *Hammering Man* in front of the building, this comprehensive museum, with collections from all three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, has gained itself a one-liner introduction: "That art museum with a giant hammering man!" Here, the museum's title, the artist, and the architect have all stepped aside. In addition, the Milwaukee Art Museum in Wisconsin has also played its trick of hardware transformation. As there were many Nordic and German immigrants in Milwaukee in the early years, the museum thus built its foundation based on a collection of German art. Now, it has become a comprehensive local museum with a collection that includes Euro-American classical art, modern art, decorative crafts, and contemporary art. The museum is also being expanded constantly. After the expansion over 50 years in the new century, 20,000 pieces of works considered classic needed to be housed in an upgraded building again. This time, the extension was designed by the Spanish architect Cala Calatrava. In order to pay tribute to the architect who grew up in Wisconsin – Frank Lloyd Wright - the museum considered Wright's spatial concept and made use of a deck-like path to lead the ship-shaped museum to the lake. By 2002, the Milwaukee Art Museum had added yet another crowd-attracting building. This time, at the entrance of the right wing of the new pavilion facing the lake, the design of a set of huge silver solar flapping bird wings has become yet another local sightseeing attraction, drawing many visitors who would come from afar to appreciate the Milwaukee silver birds entrance. These phenomena remind us that it is indeed the clothes that make the man. If we liken the museum to a pretty women, her virtue (the software) would be dimmed without her beautiful appearance (the hardware) to attract attention.

The Popularity of "Blockbuster Shows" and "Theme Parks"

The hardware structure of the art museum has become the most attractive marketing subject of the contemporary art scene, making the art museum a large public cultural space. It is no different from trade exhibition centers with special architectural features. Its educational and research function is gradually declining and it is instead increasingly oriented toward mass tourism mentality. Even its achievement and performance are measured by the headcounts of visitors to the museum. Nevertheless, this new type of large-scale art museum with wide open spaces also has its troubles. After the mass fervor for the charm of the hardware (the building) is over, it still has to have exhibitions at the end of the day. The museums with no notable collection or without permanent exhibits will have to settle for being the “space for the display of culture” and bring in some bustling exhibition projects. The most popular exhibition direction has been the “Blockbuster Show” and “Theme Park”, which will be discussed next.

In terms of attracting people, many art museums often play the trump card of “Blockbuster Show”. By using themes that the public is familiar with, the audience is allowed to return to historical scenes and enjoy the sensational experience of time travel. Rather than highlighting the architect's contribution to the hardware, the magic weapon of the “Blockbuster Show” is the appearance of celebrities and famous paintings. On 2 January 2001, London’s *The Guardian* discussed “blockbuster shows” in art museums, saying that “the art exhibition has become one of our favourite treats. Orgies of hype and merchandising, blockbuster shows are the cultural equivalent of a royal wedding or the World Cup - spectacles that make us feel part of a community of chat, deciding that yes, we really do all feel that late Monet is as fascinating if not more so than the Monet of the 1870s. Last year hardly a week went by without the opening of some absolutely unmissable show, and this year the procession rolls on, genuflecting before one modern or ancient master after another.”⁵

The cultural and art critic Arthur C. Danto made a mild critique of this trend of art museums when he wrote *The Museum of Museums* in 1992.⁶ He mentioned that the post-modern creation of art museums was a variant of the “Cathedral of Art History” from the Napoleonic era. The new entrance of the Louvre and the construction of the Pompidou Art Center are what make the art museum a “temple”. The difference is that the audience no longer has the sincere and respectful attitude of a devotee. Instead, it is like an indoor temple fair where visitors will go around to find out where the restaurant, cafe, gift shop, and bookstore are. Glass windows for views and lounge corners for resting are also necessary; while visitors are here for a journey of spiritual worship, the material needs must be properly attended to with refinement.

⁵ “Cynical Blockbusters,” *The Guardian* (London), January 1, 2001. (Retrieved from: Visual Arts Archives, January 2001, ArtsJournal Visual Arts: Daily Arts News, accessed April 2019, <http://www.artsjournal.com/visualarts/visualarts0101.shtml>)

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Harper Canada Ltd: 1992) p. 199-214

In the ten years after the publication of *The Museum of Museums*, the museum as a cultural space was rigorously discussed. As the population of art museum-goers grew steadily, cultural scholars were increasingly becoming intolerant of the crowds in these “temple fairs”. They found that there was not much growth in the population of genuine art-lovers; the art museum was only a public leisure venue with a certain cultural atmosphere. In fact, very few people would actually go to the museum for the artworks; more appeared there for the purpose of cultural socialization or were there because of media promotion. Nevertheless, the rivalry for visitors has become warfare among art museums. At the beginning of the 21st century, the two types of museum hype were achievements in hardware with a memorable feat of architecture, or in software, with gimmicks in the curatorial strategy.

“Blockbuster Shows” were popular from the 1980s to the 1990s. Because of cuts in cultural funding at that time, art museums had to find ways to help themselves, spending large sums of money on huge exhibitions in order for bigger returns. The earliest example of the international blockbuster show was the Tutankhamun Exhibition in the early 1970s, which broke a record by pouring all of its resources into funding one single exhibition. Its success attracted the attention of museum managers, and the idea that “the organization of exhibitions makes income” became an important business and management concept. In the 1980s, when the "Blockbuster Show" became a buzzword for art museums, galleries, cultural centers and technological centers, formats included:

- Large-scale loan exhibitions, which would draw unusually huge crowds to queue for the show.
- Exhibitions that were successful in their planning and marketing strategies.
- Popular yet high-end displays of cultural artifacts that belonged to certain historical periods, attracting the masses with different tastes to queue and pay for the show.
- Marketing strategies that involved urgency and immediacy, using short runs to encourage visits within a short period of time.
- Secularization of academic contents to meet the needs of the majority for leisure, entertainment, and common cultural knowledge.
- Institutional units breaking even or even making profit through organizing exhibitions.

Whether it is an exhibition for the visual arts or a showcase of cultural relics, these "Blockbuster Shows" have one thing in common; that is, they are not productions by local artists nor from local industries. It shows that marketers are well aware that "local art" does not carry the sort of "exoticism" that would charm the public. In addition, "Blockbuster Shows" are the so-called "edutainment" which confuses education with entertainment. As the "Blockbuster Shows" distance themselves from academia, museum directors claim that they are "using the crowd to promote the collection of the museum". As for those without collections, they would have to depend on increasing popularity as a way to achieve fame.

After the "Blockbuster Shows", political terms became more prevalent in the artworld than aesthetic ones. When museums looked for their new management executives, the priority consideration was their ability in fund-raising, marketing, and public relations. In the so-called "culture industry" where culture and business are interdependent on one another, the "Blockbuster Show" makes a superb case study of a phenomenon; it is controversial but widely imitated. The "Blockbuster Show" could be seen as the result of a capitalist promotion of culture; it gradually changes the way in which cultural producers and the general public view the art museum. By the beginning of the 21st century, when the cultural producers looked back, they would be surprised to find that the power of fame and celebrity had taken over that of professionalism.

The museums best at planning "Blockbuster Shows" are mostly those with the "big brother" status. These museums often have exteriors that have lost their potential to grab attention, but yet have collections that are historically famous, which allow them to organize "historical themed shows", create touring exhibitions, or spark media trends. In the case of the art museums in the United States, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Art Institute of Chicago are all comprehensive museums that house not only collections of Europe, Asia and Africa but also traditional and modern art. In recent years, almost all of the modern art "Blockbuster Shows" of 1850 to the present have come from these three institutions.⁷ During these shows, related merchandise and publications are released together. This has quickly become a cultural trend for exhibitions in art museums. The three museums have also combined the forces of their resources and reputations, and have held non-Western art themed exhibitions such as "Treasures from The Forbidden City", "Artifacts of West Africa" and "Taoism and the Arts of China". There was grand media publicity for each of these exhibitions, making them key events of the region. These exhibitions often took three to five years of planning; that they were viewed as investments is apparent.

In order to meet the needs of the masses, many art museums willingly sacrifice the clarity of their position. While the bigger, comprehensive museums are able to organize blockbuster shows for "famous people and famous objects", they have also held some contemporary themed exhibitions. Take the special exhibition section on the second level of the Art Institute of Chicago for example: a major Bill Viola retrospective there stole the limelight of other contemporary art museums. Another example of a blockbuster show of the century that made international headlines was *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* at Brooklyn Museum of New York in 2000. This exhibition stirred up controversy amongst American conservatives and liberals, and even the then Mayor of New York, Giuliani, intervened. This caused a dramatic increase in the number of visitors to the exhibition, the traffic was affected, and newspapers from all over the world reported on the event. Arnold Lehman, who was the Brooklyn Museum director at that time, was criticized for his populist direction. However, Lehman did not mind the attack and declared that he

⁷ They presented European artists' works such as Monet's *Garden*, Degas's *Dancer*, Manet's *Seascape*, Gauguin's and van Gogh's "Arles Studio", Seurat's *Island of La Grande Jatte*, etc., to satisfy modern people's imagination of the romantic and bohemian Paris bourgeois life.

would give up the so-called in-depth academic research for the majority public if he was given another chance.⁸ However, after all the commotion, this "foreign exhibition" did not create much impact on the local American masses or the art world. Instead, after the *Sensation* show, the young British artist group became famous, this new art movement and liberal style shone and gained popularity overseas, and London almost becomes the site of the new art trend of the century.

In fact, the launch of themed exhibitions to the masses is in the mold of the hot theme park exhibitions of the previous period. Major exhibitions such as biennials and triennials are the best examples of contemporary theme park shows that are huge and bustling. Many major projects of modern art museums in the new century are often "Biennales" too. Internationally speaking, the few biennials or triennials that have a historical background are usually municipal cultural events, which often require fixed or alternative exhibition venues. There are a lot of available spaces for use since the art museums of the new century are faster at producing their hardware resources than their software; it is, therefore, a very natural thing that Biennales are often hosted at art museums. Museums without a strong body of collection that has international potential tend to plan for "biennial-style theme parks" to enhance international visibility. The "Themed Exhibition" and the "Blockbuster Show" have a number of things in common: they are good at absorbing "big shot" figures and artworks from all over the world and tend to bask in the glory of loaned exhibitions. A public exhibition such as these could span as short as three to four months, or as long as three to five years.

In the making of the art museum biennial, the three most important factors for it to become a "Blockbuster" include, firstly, a charismatic theme enchanting enough to make it the only leading show; secondly, the participation of internationally acclaimed personalities so as to add weight to the show; and thirdly, intensive public relations and media publicity. With a pre-existing operating mechanism, art museums only need to worry about changing curatorial themes, artists and artworks. As such, the various "Biennales" are therefore similar to "Blockbuster Shows" in the contemporary art scene, except that the "Blockbuster" here often refers to the explosive number of artists, and art circle personalities, rather than the number of viewers.

In terms of the usage of space in biennials, installation artworks often form the "stations" that appropriately divide the park, allowing viewers to discover surprises as they visit each one. On the other hand, artworks that are participatory or interactive offer a non-visual sort of aesthetics; like samples from trade exhibition centers, they demand that visitors get their hands on and play with them. As for the artists, they are comparable to market analysts who often have to analyze data. Although all these exhibitions are characteristic of a sightseeing park, they, however, have to employ big titles and grand themes that would allow them to play the publicity game, which would in turn attract artists like flies to honey, doing their best

⁸ "A Little Show Biz in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, January 1, 2001. (Retrieved from: Visual Arts Archives, January 2001, ArtsJournal Visual Arts: Daily Arts News, accessed April 2019, <http://www.artsjournal.com/visualarts/visualarts0101.shtml>)

to fit in. As a result, even artists of this new century is going retro – they assume the role of a project contractor in the time of the Renaissance, and are much welcomed by the curatorial units, as they are not only well-reputed but also guarantee box-office success, and are versatile. Some project creators who are more self-aware know very well how to manage and promote themselves via theme parks. For example, they may manage to derive some issue peripheral to the theme, such that their subject gains intellectual weight or reflexivity. They may even consider the viewers part of their work, so as to distinguish themselves from the usual amusement parks that depend purely on sensual stimulation.

The theme of the biennial is also capable of stimulating new waves in the art world. Every time an important international biennial presents a new theme, followers would join the bandwagon by coming up with similar topics. Along with groups of scholars and experts, they put forward research seminars so that the theme could develop sub-topics, and be prolonged and stay popular. For example, if a preeminent biennial was to play the theme card of "Life is Art", then this first card must be made as huge as the space of the art museum, so that it has room for further extension, and we would start to see themes such as "art is not life", "is art life?", "art is alive", "art with life", "art without life", "is art alive?", "oh, what is art?" "Art of living", "Art of life", etc. All these are populist themes with a trusted effect. The discussions could go on to include topics such as: "civilian art under the phenomenon of global capitalism", "artistic life beyond the realm of time and space", "the relationship between virtual art and real life", "the artificial and biochemical characteristics of art", and so on. As for the artists' works, those that are relevant would fit nicely within the framework, while those that are not could still find their places.

On the other hand, some non-biennial exhibition themes could achieve regional flavour by celebrating the unique quality of specific sites. To meet popular demand, the Guggenheim Foundation carried out an operation that was utterly market-oriented – the Guggenheim in Las Vegas is an example of a museum that caters to the market's taste at a specific location. In the beginning, when the museum had just opened, Dali's exhibition was featured. Subsequently, "The Art of the Motorcycle", probably echoing the "Giorgio Armani" show at the New York Guggenheim, would satisfy the material dreams of those at the slot machines, and gratify the taste of those indulging in wine and money. The Guggenheim is considered a modern art museum with a big international collection, yet effort was made in the curatorial planning to compete for attention, and brand names were sought after to guarantee viewership; no wonder modern art museums from other regions have to work hard on their curatorial and marketing strategy.

The Dilemma: Populist VS Elitist

In order to achieve greater fame to attract audiences, there is also competition between the museums. In December 2000, the curator of the Boston Museum of Art had a debate with the curator of the Harvard University Art Museum. The topic was the populist attitude of contemporary art museums. At that time, the *Boston Herald* had published a hard-hitting headline for this forum: "Popularity Killed the Museum?"⁹ As it is no longer easy to acquire crown jewel artworks for the museum to enhance their reputations, contemporary art museums are divided between developing their hardware and software. On the other hand, at the beginning of the new century, the news of the crowds at the opening of new museums in the U.K. also triggered a marketing crisis among modern art museums in Europe and in the U.S.. Whilst cultural opinion is reproachful of museums' obsession with viewership as it does not reflect their real performance, this data is also an important concern for them. All in all, the appeal of the "Blockbuster Show" and the "Theme Park" has indeed confused the position of many museums; an exhibition with high viewership, strong advertising, and big profits is now considered a good one.

Media publicity is another area where art museums have put in tremendous efforts. For example, the American "art museum" is often treated as a cultural trademark and marketed by a public relations company. In 2001, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art engaged TWBA\Chiat\Day, a major advertising company, as an agent to promote their image. This company had been the agent for projects such as "Absolute Vodka Artists Collaboration", "Energizer Batteries Bunny", and "Apple Computer's Think Different Campaign", etc. The slogan for this advertisement for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art was "Awareness Campaign", and large-scale advertisements were put up at 60 locations throughout the city. The Art Institute of Chicago also launched a TV commercial to promote its collection and cultural atmosphere. In it, the security guard is featured as the protagonist, poking around the quiet and empty museum. In our general understanding, the art museum is a non-profit cultural institution, but when the museum is willing to invest in expensive media advertising fees or hire public relations companies for its packaging, its operation has already crossed over to that of a cultural enterprise.

So, who does the museum's cultural space belong to? Apparently, cultural marketers want not only to follow the will of the public, but also to promote high-end and famous artefacts at the same time. As a result, a new type of public cultural space is born. From the operation of the hardware war, the Blockbuster Show, and the Theme Park, the survival and defensive war of the art museum has overridden its cultural one. Today, the art museum has become a big topic in the field of cultural studies, and this should not be attributed solely to public opinion or trends. There are several elements which have caused a vicious circle, forcing some art museums to take "the path of the marketplace". In the meantime, the most important factor is the investors' attitudes toward art.

⁹ "Popularity Killed the Museum?" *Boston Herald*, December 15, 2000. (Retrieved from: December 2000, Visual Arts Archives, ArtsJournal Visual Arts: Daily Arts News, accessed April 25, 2019, <http://www.artsjournal.com/visualarts/visualarts1200.shtml>)

In 2001, American art critic Michael Brenson published the *Visionaries and Outcasts*, in which he wrote about the funding of National Endowment for the Arts for contemporary art in the United States, describing the process from support, broken trust, to the final abandonment of sponsorship of 30 years from 1965-1995. Brenson unveiled the influence of cultural policies on artists, art organizations, and cultural mechanisms. The key issue is the source of funding. The ideal scenario for any art circle would be: "Give me money, and it is none of your business thereafter," while the greatest nightmare for the museum is: "I give you money to build the museum, and it is none of my business thereafter." Instead of adding or extending the building because there is not enough room for the collections, many museums actually "build the temple before there is a deity". These are the worst examples of art museums.

Whether it is for survival or to compete for fame, the positioning of the cultural and educational mechanism of the museum has gradually become obscured. The paradox of "good or bad management" has also forced this cultural mechanism to face inspection, disintegration or the crisis of closure. The art museum is no longer capable of firmly standing its ground since historical museums are exhibiting high-tech gadgets, regional art museums are aiming to be international, and eastern museums tend to showcase western artefacts. After all, it is more important to have a "Blockbuster Show". However, for the artists, art museums are still the most ideal home for their works; it is just that current art museums prefer that artists use their galleries as hotels rather than as homes. What kind of future could a new art museum expect if there was no plan for contemporary collections and research, no war for hardware, no Blockbuster Show, and no Theme Park? When elitist ideals are being dragged down by celebrities and populist tastes, it is no wonder that after the National Endowment for the Arts terminated its grants for individual visual artists, artists had to move closer to business opportunities and consider the global market. It seems that the only way to make these artworks the future selling point of museums is through promotional "organization of events".

Prof Kao Chien-Hui, an independent art critic, curator and art educator. She focuses on the study of art criticism, curatorial practices, and the methods of art practices in Asia. She was the curator of Taiwan Pavilion in Venice Biennale, 2001. Her major books (in Chinese) includes *The Production Line of Contemporary Art - Cases of Creative Practice And Social Engagement*, *Unsilent Words - Text and Its Productive Context of Art Criticism*, *Beyond Interpretation - Society of Art Criticism and the Modern Avant-garde Movement*, *Third Wing - Art concept and Its Discontents*, *Topics on Contemporary Asia art in 2010s*, *Biennale Fever- The alternative Voice of Politics, Aesthetics and Institute*, *Discourses on Contemporary Asia Art-2010s*, *After Origin - On the Topics of Contemporary Chinese art, Art and Culture in the Early 90's*. Currently, she is a Visiting Professor of the Doctoral Program in Art Creation and Theory, Tainan National University of the Arts.

