

Tension and Irony Between the Public and the Private: Contemporary Art Museums Today

Francisco López Ruiz

1. Museums, Art and Spectacle

The museum has traditionally been a privileged institution responsible for preserving treasures: having access to a museum implies entering a world of high culture. But since the latter decades of the twentieth century, a new kind of museum has been gestating, one that is *complex and contradictory* in its façades and programs. This newcomer has learned some of its most conclusive lessons from Las Vegas. The art market also constitutes a powerful element, suggesting possibilities for museums that assert themselves as major players in the twentieth century, based on an ambiguous intersection between the public and the private.

Of all the arts (except perhaps for the cinema), architecture has the closest ties to the economy: commissions and land prices have meant that their relationship is almost immediate. But this same relationship has allowed architecture to follow the rules of the economy almost exclusively. Ambiguity—architectural and commercial—can exist in almost every aspect of a project. Fusion, irony and the vernacular abound in late-twentieth-century architecture. Today, there is no problem if an architect designs Ionic capitals in metal or if shafts are adorned with neon lights. Anything (or almost anything) goes (as long as it entertains).

2. The Rise of the Contemporary Art Museum

For Francisco Calvo Serraller (2001: 31–34), an academic at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, the Museum of Modern Art in New York was the American response to the challenge of creating a great museum for a country whose museum-grade production dated back no more than two centuries. The MoMA, founded in 1929, was the first major museum not tied to a previous historic value, with a custom-designed ideological discourse that emphasized the United States' presence in the art scene.

This marked the beginning of a wave of art museums that were new and contemporary in all their different aspects (it is interesting to compare the different definitions that are given to the terms *modern* and *contemporary* at these institutions, depending on the proclivities of each country), and their disengagement from history was supported by the very design of the buildings, based on a number of twentieth-century architectural trends. The art museums of functionalism had rejected eclecticism and history in their façades and programs. Building exteriors became a codification of institutional missions, and their professed neutrality generally did not conflict with the primary role given to the shows presented. Twentieth-century contemporary art

museums' representation of culture was proper yet stiff: they were acknowledged manifestations of public and private power.

To some architects, the death of several architectural purisms was like the fall of the Berlin Wall: killing the dogmatic and abusive parent also entailed becoming orphans living in uncertainty. Nevertheless, the death of purism also brought with it several changes in museums' architectural programs. The dogma established in 1960 by Mies van der Rohe ("Less is more") was reverted by Robert Venturi in 1970 ("Less is a bore") and then finished off in 1980 by Philip Johnson ("I am a whore"). The "high culture" of functionalist museums lost ground to more radical proposals.

More nostalgic minds evoke the time when a museum's language clearly differentiated it from a movie theater. More and more, art museums are becoming interactive cultural complexes—shopping centers embellished with elements of the amusement park. And yet (or perhaps because of this), it remains unclear whether the new laic pilgrimage to museums is convoked by the works on display or by the architectural and media shell that surrounds them. If it were up to certain architects, museums would be like supermarkets: hedonistic and brightly colored spaces that recall a casino experience.

It is symptomatic that the architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers codified the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (1977) with the same high-tech language of banks and shopping centers as that used in the Lloyds of London building (1978–1986). High-tech is put at center stage thanks to the colorful and indecipherable network of ducts, pipes and mechanical installations that are visible even on the façade. In a sense, the Georges Pompidou National Center for Art and Culture is the precursor to a new kind of contemporary art museum, important "not because of the extraordinary collection it possesses—one of the finest collections of urban art in existence—but rather because the architects turned the building and its code into an emblematic place in Paris, creating a technological image that fascinated the collectivity" (Calvo, 2001: 35).

Impressive technological resources, novel construction systems, art, propaganda and spectacle: today everything seems to coexist in art museums that offer *complexity* and *contradiction*. Architecture thus becomes a powerful vehicle for the sensibilities of its time: spaces with new relationships (theoretical, social, aesthetic, economic and even affective) with their users. Art museums assimilate the expectations, wishes and desires of contemporary societies, evident today thanks to a remarkable wealth of technical and economic resources. The museums of the twenty-first century connect complex disciplinary universes—architectural theory, art history, visual arts, institutional communication—in order to overlap concepts and meanings.

The art museum is no longer a simple receptacle of culture: it is codified with bold forms and a strident palette in order to create a new aesthetic that also anticipates a distinct social function:

In the early twenty-first century, contemporary art museums are undergoing a new revolution, sparked by an even more vehement absence of history. Their resistance to being integrated into the history museum model is based on the fact that art today has nothing to do with history. Their formula for presenting themselves presumes that the museum possesses no collections—it doesn't have them because it is not interested in collecting anything. It is a kind of "container" for temporary shows, a *Kunsthalle* elevated to the category of a museum which collects exhibitions. (Calvo, 2001: 34).

The underlying implication of the new role played by museums supposes that the contemporary art museum must struggle with the real impossibility of predicting the future. It's all but useless to try to guess what imperatives an art museum will have to respond to in, say, 2040. The Guggenheim Museum in New York—Frank Lloyd Wright's organicist gem—began to show signs of obsolescence not long after it opened in 1959. This museum was not able to display César Baldaccini's *Compressions*: sculptures made from automobiles compacted with a machine that he himself had invented, and piled in such a way as to suggest formal characteristics based on randomness. These objects submitted floors and tiles to forces reaching several tons per square meter, and required special machinery to be put in place. When he designed the building, Wright could not predict that such demands would be made of his architecture.

3. A Night at the Museum

Despite the relatively conservative setting of museums in general—not just contemporary art museums—they go to great lengths to attract new spectators, not only with their architecture, but also with a strong media presence.

Though museums once viewed the paraphernalia of publicity and marketing as undesirable, it is now clear that not only have they integrated these possibilities into their discourse, but that they actively seek them out. Movies in particular have proven to be an effective vehicle for the promotion of museums. In this sense, not only does *The Thomas Crown Affair* (John McTiernan, 1999) present all the glamour and splendor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but its cinematographic fiction also applauds the theft of an artwork. Based on Dan Brown's well-known novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) also exalts activities that one would think would be anathema to a museum: crime, murder, conspiracies and blackmail are set among canonical works by the great masters of the West.

The most recent box-office hit has been *Night at the Museum* (Shawn Levy, 2006). Clearly a product of the entertainment industry, what is interesting here is the presence of the American Museum of Natural History. Its re-creation in the movie's sets successfully falsifies the real museum's easily recognizable visual language of dioramas and fossils. The main lobby of the fictional museum features not an Apatosaurus

but the legendary Tyrannosaurus Rex, which is far more marketable as the materialization of terror in its purest form. *Night at the Museum's* most ingenious metaphor—perhaps the only truly meritorious one—consists of imagining that the normalcy of a museum can become something vibrant and spectacular that eclipses the most intense real experiences. Night after night, the solemnity of the exhibition space gives way to magic: boring dioramas and inert fossils spring to life thanks to the old trick of the Egyptian jewel that is activated by some Pharaonic curse.

The American Museum of Natural History plays a conscious role in this movie, with the aim of improving its own image. The six gift shops distributed over the real museum's five floors offer a novelized version of the movie. On the front cover, a photograph of Ben Stiller with the T. Rex emphasizes the basic mechanism of this comedy: the Hollywood star system combined with special effects; we know from the outset that the book will be an exact duplicate of what we saw in the film.

Two Fridays a month, it is even possible to participate in the *Night at the Museum* sleeper program. Children from eight to twelve years old can spend the night at the AMNH. Emulating the movie fiction, T. Rex is one of the stars of the program. Included in the price are an evening snack and a light breakfast. The program has been a roaring success: the website <http://www.amnh.org/kids/sleepovers> regularly shows all upcoming dates as being sold out.

Architecture, like the movies, cannot exist purely as a concept: to achieve the physical concretion of the project, one must seek funding from a sponsor. In the movies, this would be the producer, and in the world of architecture, it is the client. Nevertheless, not only do architects play a leading role: their buildings can become cinematographic icons or merely luxury objects. The art historian Peter Krieger of the UNAM Institute of Aesthetic Research offers the following analysis of the movie *The World Is Not Enough*:

In the opening scene, viewers see a brief shot of the new Guggenheim Museum [...]. But it is of little symbolic importance to the script—it serves as decoration, plain and simple. Furthermore, like product placement of brands such as the Omega watch, the BMW Z3 or the Visa card, the Guggenheim's image [...] appears as a registered trademark. Thus the wishes of local politicians who attempted to attract international tourism with spectacular buildings and signature architecture are granted, but the scenographic qualities of these constructions are lost. It is truly a shame that the filmmakers did not take advantage of the opportunity to show James Bond lost in the deconstructionist metal labyrinth of the new Guggenheim. Not since *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* has there been another filmic space so suited to producing tension as Frank Gehry's polemical building. (Krieger, 2001: 20).

A recent billboard designed by José Cuauhtémoc Terán uses a promotional strategy based on a similar mechanism. In the foreground there is a young woman looking content; behind her, in the distance, we see the Guggenheim Museum. The slogan reads *Sonríe, estás en España* ("Smile, you're in Spain"). And thus, Gehry's Guggenheim becomes an object of desire which the Spanish Tourism Board has formulated to attract Mexican tourists.

4. A New Museum Model for Contemporary Art

Unlike other art forms, architecture requires a budget that is directly proportional to the desire to make it convincing and spectacular. Aside from the traditional media imbalance between the cultural metropolis and its suburbs, in the case of the contemporary art museum there is the added issue of how budgets are actually distributed among different cities whose museum models thrive in different geographies. One of the most conclusive examples of this is the Guggenheim organization.

A specific merit of the Guggenheim *chain* is that it operates its museums as a *franchise*, similar to McDonald's (something that is no longer considered a negative quality, as Venturi and Jencks have taught us). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation has *branches* in Bilbao and Berlin, as well as the Peggy Guggenheim collection in Venice, while Frank O. Gehry is planning to expand this franchise into a more exotic locale on the Western cultural map: Dubai. In each case, the chain chooses a city that strictly complies with the brand's personality. It is also important to choose a famous architect who will link his personal prestige to that of the new building. In the same way, Rem Koolhaas attempted to elevate Las Vegas to new cultural heights based on the Guggenheim project in that city.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao designed by Frank Gehry is a wonderful museum, conceptually already part of the twenty-first century. It presents interiors and façades that are a far cry from the cautious and functional *white box* proposed by modern architecture, thanks to enormous titanium masses whose metal surfaces change color with the time of day and the Vizcayan rain. Calvo Serraller has suggested that the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is a posthistoric museum, given that plans for a collection have been announced but never carried out (Calvo, 2001: 35–38). Bearing in mind the success of this project, perhaps it makes no sense to even form a collection, given that what is truly important is the type of Guggenheim-spectacle presented. In these museums without artworks, Calvo maintains, the fundamental artistic identity pertains to the building itself. Its significance lies in creating spectacular images linked to a certain symbolic dimension of the city. This will be its only measure of success or failure: whether or not the projected image, the urban space that the museum occupies and its ability to symbolize the collective desires of that metropolis will meet expectations or not. If the building does not function in that sense, the museum will be condemned to failure: "In a linguistic paradox, the modern art *museum* of the

twenty-first century was often more of a *mausoleum*. Today, the *modern* art museum is something that ceases to be *modish*.”

Societies demand that contemporary art museums provide entertainment; as such, museums will be designed with a festive attitude, open to surprise and pleasure. More than anything, the intention is to surprise the visitor: “If it creates a state of surprise, and if that surprise is a pleasant one, it is a clear victory. All that this circle of surprises needs is a large shell that is in itself a surprise, and that will give rise to a new dimension. For that reason, when speaking of posthistory, it falls to posthistoric art to in fact be *post-art*” (Calvo, 2001: 38).

5. Performance and Chimera in the Contemporary Art Museum's Public and Symbolic Space

The honorary director of the Museo del Prado Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez has stated that the art exhibit has often turned into a “theatrical performance” or “exterior paraphernalia” that deceives the public. In his view, contemporary art museums would be difficult things to plan and promote in the twenty-first century, given that a large percentage of contemporary art production would involve immaterial or ephemeral expressions—in other words, something that would be virtually impossible to contain in a museum, to store or to display either permanently or periodically. Much of contemporary art would be based essentially on *events*—things that happen and then disappear. The only remaining record of the event would be on video, film or slides. The paradox is that monuments that become symbols of the cities where they are located are built as a forum for this kind of ephemeral contemporary art. But these monuments are not museums in the traditional sense of the word. When speaking of the massive building that has become the *mother of all museum battles*, Pérez Sánchez also stated:

The successful role that the Guggenheim has played in the life of Bilbao is based on its architectural concept, because it is like an enormous sculpture that has created a space and climate of tension around it. But its content is ever-changing in the absolute and could eventually even be exhausted, so naturally, the only record of many of the Guggenheim's great internal expressions will wind up on videotape in some tiny office. In this sense, I believe that the great museums of contemporary art will cease to meet with the success they have enjoyed thus far because they may turn into video screening rooms, audition halls, spaces for the presentation of things whose volume will be utterly different (Pérez Sánchez, 2001: 24).

To this Spanish researcher, the “excessive euphoria” that has led others to emulate the Bilbao model will result in the construction of architectural spaces which will be solemnly inaugurated and then subsequently underused, given that political situations

change and maintenance is difficult and expensive. Art museums of the kind that have developed since the 1980s would be closed, becoming enormous monuments to decadence.

6. The Rough Terrain of Art Collections in the Present Day

There is one particularly significant condition of contemporary art museums, related to the value of the contemporary art collection and the evolution of art following the first avant-garde movements. The philosopher Hans Heinz Holz has been one of several to announce the death of art. But in his case, this not simply a metaphor. While in the rest of the market, objects have some kind of function (and the object's quality in terms of that function determines supply and demand), the problem with art is that it doesn't have any practical application. As such, it is not easy to determine its quality:

More and more, and in rapid succession, artists feel themselves pushed toward innovations of the type that allow them to express their individuality and remain within the market. [...] Artists now only produce objects for immediate consumption, sold at exorbitant prices. The ideological function of the artwork as a manifestation of pure possession with no purpose in and of itself is reaching paradoxical extremes. After its purchase, work with no other value than that of being possessed goes straight into the safe, or into the junk room, which amounts to the same thing. (Holz, 1979: 56).

If art and the market that governs it become primarily a question of power and promotion, the contemporary art museum will become the same thing. Faced with a hypothetical speculative void in the codification of contemporary art and its relationship with the public, only architecture would prevail in the absence of meaning.

It would be difficult for any other cultural manifestation to have more questionable criteria regarding product value than contemporary art does. Peter Krieger (2000: 25–29) analyzes how the language used in professional sectors of the art world can further cloud our perception of art objects—a perception that is essential to the functioning of a contemporary art museum:

In the massive production of art criticism, what predominates is the cult of the connoisseur, who either keeps his evaluation criteria to himself or simply doesn't have any. We know all the advantages given to the connoisseur. It isn't possible to discuss or examine his evaluations because they seem untouchable. They also help to steer the economic workings of the art market. A generous review by an influential critic boosts the price of the work in question; his condemnation brings it down. Two systems come into play in this latter aspect: art and the economy. Outside of that, the art system itself seems circular, and criticism rarely interrupts its autopoiesis (Krieger, 2000: 26)

Krieger also discusses the exhibition *Words Don't Come Easy*, presented at Kunsthaus Hamburg in May 1992. The curators Jörg-Uwe Albig and Wolf Jahn created "a simple yet effective" manner of questioning art terminology. They confronted thirty works of contemporary art with thirty quotes from recognized art critics (Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, A. R. Pench and Amulf Reiner were some of the best-known exhibitors). Krieger states that even more so than the show itself, the catalogue was a device that demonstrated the separation between word and image: "Voided of meaning but with an enigmatic contrived insistence," "Voyage to the expressive subconscious," "A tormented abundance of tortuous associations and premonitions" (Krieger, 2000: 8) are some of the turns of phrase ostensibly designed to provide a deeper understanding of the work in question.

If we consider this ambiguity to be a window of opportunity for architects, there is no doubt that they have made the most of it.

American art critic Norbert Lynton states that the culture of the contemporary art museum takes things that were once living, in cultural and social terms, and isolates them in glass urns:

Art history was born on the eve of Romanticism, and the art museum a day later. It too has its limitations. As a preserver of works of art and a collector of information about them, the museum is invaluable. But it is, of course, the wrong place for art. It is also just about the only place where the public can see art. The museum stresses both the variety of the world's art and the underlying unity of man's creativity, and if it embraces contemporary art in its range it may help to reduce the public's suspicion that recent art is nothing but a number of irresponsible, arbitrary acts. But the museum is a herbarium, not a garden or a piece of the countryside (Lynton, 1998: 360).

In his text, Lynton presents the idea that capitalism gives greater thrust to the notion of virile competition. Nevertheless, for the American critic, this idea is gradually losing ground. According to Lynton, we need ordinary, accessible art in the same way that we need nature, and perhaps the large art museums put up certain obstacles before the spectator:

Venice is a postcard; St. Mary Magdalen is a bundle of Freudian ambiguities, a female body and a character in a half-forgotten story; and the still life is an enticing photograph in an upmarket color magazine. [...] Even if the subjects were more real to us the museum context would inhibit our response. Museums are the treasure cabinets of history, and what we see in them is history and treasures. It takes a positive effort to focus attention on one work and to see it as itself, not as representative of an age, an artist, a culture (Lynton, 1998: 361).

The museum system should not be a voracious one, in the sense that the stronger and more savage eliminate the *less suitable*, as if the only thing that mattered were masterpieces. So in Lynton's view, art history, museums and critics should stop speaking of art in combative terms.

7. The Architect: A Prima Donna in a Cultural Star System

What is sought today is not architectural purism, but rather impact. It has its positive side: more people go to contemporary art museums now. However, unlike other art museums, the collection on display and aesthetic pleasure may not be the most important things here. Visiting the Louvre, for example, implies coming into contact with the old masters such as Da Vinci. Ieoh Ming Pei's architectural intervention and Dan Brown's novel constitute recent curiosities that do not affect the Louvre's aura. Contemporary art museums have imposed a model

In which the only artist and important figure is the architect, notwithstanding the space's museographic needs. Furthermore, the architect is triumphant if he does not respect any museographic norms: the less he respects them the better, because if he did respect them, the result would probably be a conventional building without any real interest, one which would not have any impact on the collective imagination, and would not have a media presence. The fact that the extravagance of architectural forms can make it impossible to display any works is a lesser evil, and of course, a nonexistent evil for those museums that have no work to display (Calvo, 2001: 38).

Most contemporary art museums do not possess a very weighty collection: the leading role played by the architecture overwhelms the work displayed. Contemporary art museums today compete (at a clear disadvantage) with a great number of sensorial stimuli and cultural proposals: more and more, they are forced to be multimedia spectacles and to use a language that approaches that of media events. Like television, art museums today battle for potential audiences, leading to new and unheard of struggles among interest groups:

The inordinate success of our museums, brought on by the pretense of promoting ourselves to government agencies as true economic agents, is a cause for concern. We have gone so far as to demonstrate to our city councils how much direct and indirect revenue our cultural institutions have brought to public coffers! We can see the day when all our reasoning as to how much income our museums generate for our cities begins to sound so sensible to those in power that our exhibitions will have to be studied by local or federal civil servants prior to being awarded any funding, which will be based on the criterion of whether

or not a given project will contribute “good money.” If we put our souls up for sale, we should not be surprised at who is willing to buy them (Álvarez y Holo, 2005: 25–26).

For Jorge Agostini (2004: 98–104), the museum’s virtual space is not the only thing that is evolving: its real spaces are also changing. Bold museum projects attract spectators because of the architect’s prestige, the spaces, their promotion by municipal, state and national governments... and perhaps even because of the collections they hold. Museums have become landmarks that identify entire cities and become the main points of interest for tourists. But this seduction carries a cost. Individual creation leads to *independent museums* (Santiago Calatrava is a good example). Like the movies, Agostini states, museums have an architectural star system. The building is the museum, the most important and sometimes the *only* piece in its collection. The museum building is conceived of as a monument on the outside and a great tourist attraction on the inside. Eager for self-actualization through their work, the architects of the star system ignore the advice of museologists and other experts. Only a handful of architects express an interest in protecting the collections, taking the urban context into account, or protecting the environment—in particular, controlling energy consumption or waste generation.

8. Final Reflections

Two events in Mexico suggest nearly contradictory possibilities regarding the institutional strategies of contemporary art museums. First, during the final three months of 2004, the Carrillo Gil Museum presented the architectural intervention entitled *Paracaidista: Av. Revolución 1608 bis*. (*paracaidista* literally translates as “parachutist,” but in local slang it means “squatter”). Graciela Schmilchuk explains that with this work, the museum turned itself out onto the street (2005: 52–57). Héctor Zamora built a temporary shelter with a private entrance, through which the public could invade private property (with the museum’s consent), in a “three-dimensional visual text” that scaled two walls of the museum but did not lean against them. Made from materials typical to shanty housing (corrugated sheet metal, cardboard, wood), it was a very precarious structure (also in a symbolic sense) built around another, original structure, but without being supported by it. Here, Zamora explored construction techniques for light structures in order to raise questions concerning the current precarious situation of museums. In interviews carried out by Schmilchuk, twenty-eight percent of the people surveyed were unaware that the building at the corner of Revolución and Altavista was in fact a museum; while forty percent were aware of that fact, but had never been there. In other words, sixty-eight percent of the sample did not truly know the museum. The few interviewees that expressed some interest in contemporary art thought that this piece represented a valuable renovation of the museum’s proposals. They thought it

was interesting for two reasons: because the structure was well made, and because it referred to a widely recognized and difficult social reality—although it cost more than USD \$40,000 to make. Nevertheless, twenty-six percent of the interviewees thought it was ugly. The Mexican historian and art critic Francisco Reyes Palma stated that Zamora’s work “is characterized by how it plays with ambiguity, which can then provoke genuine nodes of meaning.” He went on to say that this intervention in particular “involved engineering, sculpture, architecture, art action and criticism” (Reyes Palma, 2005: 13). With this work, Zamora drew public attention to the Carrillo Gil Museum, which is relatively unknown in the Mexican art world, through a spectacular action intended to contradict the solemn nature of many museum institutions. Numerous Mexican critics opined that Zamora had imprinted his work with social content and a desire to interact with the common spectator, by means of a product that rejected glamour.

Secondly, following a year of negotiations around the possible construction of a branch of the Guggenheim museum in Guadalajara, Enrique Norten’s submission was selected over those of Jean Nouvel and Asymptote (Hani Rashid and Lise-Anne Couture). The project consists of a 180-meter-tall translucent tower composed of irregular volumes with spaces that will serve as meeting places. The program includes exhibition halls, restaurants, coffee shops and gift shops. The tower rises above a public park alongside the ecological reserve that is home to the impressive ravine called Barranca de Oblatos—which marks the boundary of the city of Guadalajara. This eighty-million-dollar project will be inaugurated in September 2010 (Solís, 2005: 20–21). The fact that a Mexican architect has been chosen to definitively place Guadalajara on the cultural (and tourism) map of the greater, globalized context is clearly a major event. The project has also been criticized by the association of Mexican museums.

National, regional and municipal governments have been able to turn museums to their own benefit, in both economic and promotional terms, in a struggle to stand out among all the other cultural and commercial offerings available. Calls for submissions are generally won by recognized architects, creating a media frenzy which spurs the public to visit the final product. Art museums in the twenty-first century ferociously defend individuality to the death. And so architecture becomes an emblem for power, welfare and progress. The American architects Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown have brought the world a Las Vegas-based concept of buildings as enormous advertisements.

Since that time, it has become clear that contemporary art museums in particular can also become enormous advertisements. Shopping centers and their urgency for consumption seem to infiltrate the institution of the museum. This gives contemporary art museums many new opportunities, and also challenges.

Translated by Michelle Suderman.

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