

Museum – Art – Education:

Ways of Doing, Ways of Seeing, Ways of Thinking

“So, this is, in some ways, often called the first piece of conceptual art. Does anyone know what it is? I don’t expect the ladies to know,” says a British aid worker to a group of bewildered schoolgirls somewhere in Afghanistan in a brief and somewhat bizarre scene from Adam Curtis’s documentary *Bitter Lake* (2015), as she displays a photo of an upside-down urinal, that is, of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). She¹ continues: “An artist called Marcel Duchamp, who is very important in Western art, put this toilet in an art gallery about a hundred years ago. It was a huge revolution.” Several scenes later, the art lesson comes to a conclusion: “Of course it was very provocative, people were very angry, and I think it’s important to understand when this kind of work emerged it was partly political. It was to fight against the system and say, ‘What is art? It is what I think it is.’”

At first glance, this scene seems to represent an amalgamation of all the problems that could possibly arise with respect to using art in (any) education. Besides the expected invoking of notions of hegemony, colonization, indoctrination and oppression, it also aims to acknowledge a certain sense of the uselessness of art, or perhaps even assume the detrimental effect that art may inflict on the young and inexperienced observer. After all, up until recently much of Europe, for example, seemed to share the sentiment. Even worse, we somehow know that the ugliest consequences are yet to come, maybe soon, maybe in some more distant future: surely those kids will misconfigure the entire cultural concept of the West; quite possibly they will now hate and fear whatever they think art is, quite possibly forever; this trauma might (will!) result in the psychological birth of this or that pathology. But if this image, this scene, feels wrong on so many levels, what kind of image might feel right? Is it really Duchamp’s work that is the most harrowing detail in this story? What might the kids really be thinking about it all? Let’s return to the classroom a bit later, after a brief examination of the conceptual and historical relations between the education system and the world of art.

¹ The teacher/aid worker we see in the film is probably an employee of *Turquoise Mountain Trust (Bonyad-e Ferozkoh)*, a British NGO operating in Afghanistan according to their mission statement “Artists Transforming Afghanistan”.

In between *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*: Trajectories of “Useful Knowledge”

The very fact that we are seeing widespread discussion of education is symptomatic of an extreme situation. During the “best of times,” education was discussed in relation to the growing economy and technological advancements as those issues that revolved around the question of producing adequate professionals by expanding and improving scientific disciplines and methods. That discussion was underpinned by the ideology of social progress and imbued with hopes for a better future; it was concerned with expansion and advancement, with what to add to the growing field of studies, of subjects, themes and methods to be learned, in order to meet – even exceed – whatever the demands of the future might be. Now, in the “worst of times”, the discussion on education seems formally unchanged, since it still revolves around questions related to the most adequate disciplinary and methodological model for coping with the new social and economic structures. But today the primary task has shifted from expansion to taking tactical steps backwards in order to “readjust” the educational system in accordance with the exigencies of the ongoing economic crisis. One of the first “cuts” that such policy demands addresses the future. Once progressive – and at the same time necessarily utopian – the idea of future has been eliminated from scientific and socio-economical discourse, and reduced to “pragmatic forms of crisis management” driven by criteria such as financial “self-sustainability” and economic “resource optimization”.

If we add to this discussion the contemporary re-examinations of the concept of Museum – a cognitive and ideological apparatus that was once crucial for the understanding of what the world is and what humans are – we witness a perfect storm, and find ourselves at the very centre, where the two crises meet. Those crises are telling, reminding us that the flight towards the future (once again) seems to have lost its way, and that (once again) we are unsure how to think Museums, or all art for that matter. Have the notions of Education and of Museum finally been exhausted? What is the use of either of the two in a world that seems to be undoing a lot of the achievements of past decades? Have School and Art simply become “too expensive” for the needs of today?

Historically, the connections between art and education were established very early on, with the idea that the means of art should lie at the very core of both the learning process and becoming an autonomous individual. The concept of *liberal arts* has been firmly embedded in the Western academic education ever since the late antiquity, outlining the field of possibly useful knowledge deemed essential in becoming an independent person, providing the knowledge necessary to take an active part in public life. The liberal arts (*artes liberales*) are those subjects or skills that in classical antiquity were considered essential for a free person (*liberalis*, ‘worthy of a free person’) to know in order to take an active part in civic life,² something that (for Ancient Greece) included participating in public debate, defending oneself in court, serving on juries, and most importantly, military service. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric formed the core of the liberal arts, while arithmetic, geometry, music theory, and

² As Roy Harris describes such concept is the consequence of the fact that “from late antiquity onwards, Western education became essentially an education based on literacy”: “It is this partition of the curriculum which reflects, unmistakably, the extent to which, in the universities at least, the arts had come to be regarded as both applications and developments of human reason rather than utilitarian pursuits of pleasurable recreations. Activities that had neither verbal nor numerical foundation, or demanded a subordination of these to extraneous objectives (as, for instance, agriculture and architecture), fell outside universities’ educational brief.” Roy Harris, *The Necessity of Artspeak. The language of the arts in the Western tradition*, Continuum, London and New York, 2003, p. 33-34

astronomy also played a (somewhat lesser) part in education. This curriculum of humanism spread throughout Europe during the 16th century and became the educational foundation for the schooling of the European elites, regardless of whether they were the part of the “emerging bourgeoisie, or part of the political administration, the clergy, or perhaps entering the learned professions of law and medicine.” Although the modern concept of education is today quite far from the “liberal arts worldview”, now being subsumed to the knowhow paradigm and other forms of instrumentalisation of knowledge under capitalism, the academic title of Bachelor of Arts (BA) still reminds us of the connection between the formally recognized academic member of society and her proficiency in the matter of arts.

As far as Art goes, however, the scepticism was there from the very start, for both the Old and the Middle Ages had their reasons to be suspicious of the concept of art in education. Plato famously feared that Art could, with its unmatched power over the observer, falsely reveal what can be mistaken for Truth but is actually not, while Christianity feared any version of Truth other than the one it offered. By the time the Renaissance arrived the term Art had accumulated a lot of fear and scepticism around it – its release of tensions in the post-Enlightenment era was a source of immense power, and Art demonstrated its unmatched supremacy in the complex mediation of the world.

Unlike the concept of apprenticeship, the liberal arts-based formal education, both in its lower (frequently mandatory) and especially higher levels (frequently described as academic), came to be connected with the concept of abstract thinking. Although the utility of abstraction was praised by the Enlightenment as the “free thinking” behind reason and science, Romanticism revealed its underside in the form of imaginative free association that countered cold, rational thought. The faculty of Art to “skip” or to “slip” the systematic scientific observation of reality and venture into many other (imagined) worlds that apparently do not belong to the given reality was always considered subversive, and at best a distraction from the task of rationally comprehending the world as it is.

The contemporary notion of liberal arts (history, language, literature) was born in the “best of times” in order to provide a level of general knowledge and to develop general intellectual capacities (like reason and judgment) as opposed to strictly professional or vocational skills. There was a concern that these new specialized professionals would lack a comprehensive worldview that corresponded to the demands of the dominant ideology. Considered sufficiently disciplined and systematized, Art played an important role in this project as the main vehicle by which to accept the values of the “Atlantic civilization”. Once such values were accepted, liberal education in the 21st century will put new emphasis on so-called “people skills” – learning to appreciate cultural diversity and fostering tolerance of others and otherness, as well as learning how to cope with constantly fluctuating social circumstances, for in the era of (post-)globalization especial importance is given to communication. Today Art has largely been reduced to a subsidiary role and is used as an informative or illustrative tool, while at the same time it has been shifted to the centre of professional education as the primary vehicle of entrepreneurial creativity. Far from being perceived as allusive and treacherous, Art is today considered one of the pillars of the cultural and ideological foundations, as well as an important constituent part of the (global-neoliberal) economy.

Museums and Musing Over Education

The Enlightenment gave birth to Art as institution, discipline and profession that ideologically celebrates freedom of thought and creation, while promoting the knowledge of Art as an indispensable means to becoming a civilized person in the new bourgeois society. The global colonization that followed the Age of Discovery enabled the realization of the indisputable importance of Art in understanding both the development of the New World and its origins in the obsolete and fantastic Old World. This brought about a strange effect: some Europeans were overwhelmed and fell into hysteria faced with this new power of Art. The phenomenon, characterized by rapid heartbeat, dizziness, confusion and even hallucinations, was later named hyperkulturemia or the Stendhal syndrome,³ thus separating the civilized – city dwellers, citizens or simply the bourgeois – from the others that were too primitive to relate to the concept, or even had “no word for art” in their languages. Museums were precisely those social institutions charged with maintaining and regulating this game of separation, division and re-unification, with its primary task to cultivate well-adjusted subjects for the dominant social order.

The ancient Greek etymon of the word *museum* refers to the Muses – the patron divinities of the arts, suggesting that the Museum is actually a temple. Nevertheless, it is widely considered that Plato founded the first museum as an educational institution, one that teaches liberal arts under the patronage of the respectable Muses in charge. This building dedicated to the study of arts, rather than simply another institution similar to school, largely resembled what we would recognize today as a library. It is then little surprise that early discussions of modern museums drew parallels with libraries; as J. Lynne Teather pointed out in her research on the shaping of modern museums based on the experiences of 19th and early 20th century Britain,⁴ the emerging Museum professionals from the second half of the 19th century perceived themselves as “without a history, without traditions, almost without experience”, and found the only professional connection and topic of reference in the work of well established librarians. This was especially so when considering the respective roles of curator and librarian, as Teather reminds us quoting the following argument: “What is the function of the librarian? It is to procure good books, put them on shelves, take care of them, and have them always accessible to visitors. But it is not the function of a librarian to teach the people who come there Greek, Latin history, geography, English literature, or anything else...”⁵ But apparently Museums are not Libraries, and others valued the educational potential of Museums greatly, to the extent that “curators should teach the teacher”.⁶

The Museum’s role to teach (both professionals and public) and to provide public knowledge was both emphasized and challenged from the very beginning, in various ways. During the late 19th to early 20th century, after the earlier stages of acquiring, collecting and

³ The phenomenon was first explored in the book *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio* (1817) by Stendhal. The book documents this condition brought on by his first visit to the Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence. The syndrome was diagnosed and named in 1979 by Italian psychiatrist Dr. Graziella Magherini.

⁴ J. Lynne Teather, “The museum keepers: The museums association and the growth of museum professionalism”, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 1990, p. 25

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32. Lynne Teather quotes from E. E. Howarth, “The Museum and the School”, *Museums Journal*, 14, March 1915.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32, Lynne Teather quotes from William Evans Hoyle, “The Use of Museums in Teaching”, *Museums Journal* 2, February 1903

systematizing, the emphasis shifted to the Museum's relation to education and public programming. ("...(W)ith the additional pressures related to museum education and public programming came more debates about the nature of museum work and the balance of education and collections work.")⁷ During the modern era Museums were frequently "saved", precisely by invoking their mission of public education, indeed becoming one of the central resources in most of the formal educational systems still in use today. For something that for a very long time was viewed as useless and even possibly detrimental to education, Art came to be accepted as a (near) legitimate source of cognition. Still, even today, its status as a provider of knowledge is frequently challenged, and instead subordinated to "proper", scientific knowledge.

The history of the development of the Museum can also be seen as a history of attempts to construct a type of display for its knowledge, to find a way to present the knowledge it contained in its trove of artefacts and to trigger learning processes using its great faculty for showing and telling (narration). In Europe, and later also in its colonies, throughout centuries of Christian aristocratic rule, churches were decorated with religious sculptures, carvings, paintings, mosaics and stained glass windows depicting scenes and characters from the Bible. Such displays represented the so-called Poor Man's Bible, a kind of picture book in space aimed for those who were illiterate but who still had to know the "Word of God". Those awe inspiring show-and-tell routines are the historical precursors of exhibition and museum narratives, which still rely on instructive stories and edifying examples in order to produce a certain knowledge-effect for its spectators.

Over time, museum exhibitions adopted different principles in structuring their displays: while the 19th century museums proclaimed the era of systems, their 20th century counterparts were celebrating movements; and today the sole structural principle backed up with scientific claims is quickly being abandoned, with the emphasis shifting to the dynamics of criticism and a re-focusing on programmatic doubt and a mandatory re-examination of the epistemological frameworks of modernity. As exhibition execution always corresponds to the knowledge it is working to convey and instil – since the very knowledge to be passed down is itself in question – today's exhibition displays tend to be more complex, more spectacular and less straightforward.

Rethinking Museum as Colonial Project in the Post-Colonial Era

At the outset of her 1992 essay, Mieke Bal is standing in Central Park, in New York, between the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which caters to "matters of art" on one side of the park, and the American Museum of Natural History, on the other, exploring and tracing the story of "life", of "universal" human development. These two represent the sixth and third most visited museums in the world, respectively. "Around ten o'clock most mornings yellow dominates the surroundings, as an endless stream of school buses discharges noisy groups of children who come to the museum to learn about 'life.'"⁸ Before we get in, Bal reminds us that "comprehensive collecting is a form of domination," and that "museums belong to an era of scientific and colonial ambition, from the Renaissance through the early 20th century, with its climactic moment in the second half of the 19th century."⁹ This points to the primary

⁷ Ibid., p. 32

⁸ Mieke Bal, "Telling, Showing, Showing Off", *Critical Inquiry* 18, 1992, p. 557

⁹ Ibid., p. 560

function that the Museum draws from its own history – the ideological justification of Western domination over the rest of the world. Nevertheless, she aims to analyse Museum as “not the nineteenth-century colonial project but the twentieth-century educational one.”¹⁰ It is the way in which this knowledge is constructed and conveyed in such institutions that Bal aims to explore. According to her, the Museum of Natural History, representing the “other of the Met”, seems to be a good place to observe the way knowledge conveyed by the Museum is articulated and represented, as well as the way visitors “take it” as subjects of the museological operation.¹¹ She illustrates an important part of this operation through the way in which the American Museum of Natural History shows “the human rise to civilization”. The Official Guide Book is explicit about its edifying task: “A monument to humanity and nature, the Museum instructs, it inspires, and it provides a solid basis for the understanding of our planet and its diverse inhabitants.”¹² As human cultures are presented as higher and lower in terms of development – with “our” culture representing the historical peak of development – it inevitably results in a more or less clear division between “us” and “them”.¹³ It is precisely this taxonomic ordering that is doing the job of ideologically justifying Western artistic and cultural superiority. The same is also present at the Met, where “Western European art dominates, American art is represented as a good second cousin, evolving as Europe declines, while the parallel marginal treatment of ‘archaic’ and ‘foreign’ art, from Mesopotamian to Indian, contrasts with the importance accorded to ‘ancient’ as predecessor: the Greeks and Romans.”¹⁴

Such implicit exclusions on the basis of race and culture have been thoroughly criticized over the course of the late 20th century, making museums “definitively compromised by postromantic critique, postcolonial protest, and postmodern disillusionment.”¹⁵ As they cannot avoid coping with such obvious reproaches, museums have to include self-reflection of their own ideological position and history, which assigns them the status of what Bal calls the “meta-museum”. “The double function of the museum as display of its own status and history (its metafunction), as well as of its enduring cognitive educational vocation (its object-function), requires the absorption in the display of that critical consciousness.”¹⁶ Therefore, a meta-museum “speaks to its own complicity with practices of domination while it continues to pursue an educational project that, having emerged out of those practices, has been adjusted to new conceptions and pedagogical needs. Indeed, the use of the museum in research and education is insisted on in its self-representations...”¹⁷ Yet, the question

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 561

¹¹ “While the Met displays art for art’s sake, as the highest forms of human achievement, the American Museum displays art as an instrumental cognitive tool – anonymous, necessary, natural.” Ibid., p. 559

¹² Ibid., p. 557-558

¹³ In fact, both museums are grounded on one and the same taxonomic basis: “The division of ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ between the east and west sides of Manhattan relegates the large majority of the world’s population to static existence and assigns to only a small portion the higher status of producers of art in history.” Ibid., p. 559

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 557

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 560

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 562

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 560

remains, whether the existing self-reflective strategies amount to a self-criticism potent enough to rectify previous faults and shortcomings and to bring radical changes to the content and procedures of its educational effort.

In order to examine this mechanism further, Bal considers the Museum's display as a narratological device: "Indeed, the space of a museum presupposes a walking tour, an order in which the exhibits and panels are to be viewed and read. Thus it addresses an implied 'focalizer', whose tour is the story of the production of the knowledge taken in and taken home... [T]he display is a sign system working in the realm between the visual and the verbal, and between information and persuasion, as it produces the viewer's knowledge."¹⁸ The effectiveness of this rhetoric of display is situated in the dynamic between the verbal panels (explanatory texts) and the visual exhibits, "a specific exchange between verbal and visual discourse."¹⁹ "This is one form of truth-speak, the discourse that claims the truth to which the viewer is asked to submit, endorsing the willing suspension of disbelief that rules the power of fiction. For the visitor entering through this hall, this is the equivalent of the 'once upon a time' formula, the discourse of realism setting the terms of the contract between viewer or reader and museum or storyteller."²⁰ One of the central mechanisms employed here is the naturalization achieved by what Bal calls the "aesthetics of realism", as "Realism is the truth-speak that obliterates the human hand that wrote it, and the specifically Western human vision that informed it."²¹ Thus the narrative told by the display becomes indistinguishable from "reality" – it produces the "truth" of witnessing the truth, of being able to "be there and see that". It is precisely the effect of the rhetoric of metadata – the way artefacts are named and contextualized, particularly the way they are connected and juxtaposed in their spatial disposition, how they are related with other artefacts, and, eventually, with the observer.

Bal also finds a strange precondition for understanding the works of art or artefacts on display in the Museum: one has somehow in advance to be familiar enough with their meaning. More precisely, one has to find satisfaction in confirming the "well-known" meanings offered by the Museum: "[W]ell known' disqualifies as ignorant the surprised viewer who hesitates to willingly suspend disbelief."²² This puts the Museum's educational function in question: "By seeing what one already knows one cannot see what one doesn't know (yet). What is destroyed, then, is the educational function of art that is so central to the museum's self-image," Bal warns us in another text written a few years later.²³ Consequently, the knowledge thus produced and recognized by a museum visitor, amounts to a confirmation of her subjugation to the dominant ideology that helps her affirm her belonging to the "civilized" and "cultural" people of the West. In Bal's opinion, the main issue surrounding the present-day meta-museum as self-reflective institution is its knowledge production. "[W]hereas the verbal panels do demonstrate an awareness of the burning issues of today's

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 561

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 562

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 563-564

²¹ Ibid., p. 568

²² Ibid., p.574

²³ Mieke Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum" in: R. Greenberg, B.W. Ferguson and S. Nairne, (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 147

society, it is the lack of the absorption of a more acute and explicit self-criticism, and the presence of an apologetic discourse in its stead [that remains problematic].”²⁴

She offers, almost in passing, an interesting way out of this situation: “Instead of the panels on which words give meaning to the order of things (allusion intended), large mirrors would have been a better idea. Strategically placed mirrors could not only allow the simultaneous viewing of the colonial museum and its postcolonial self-critique, but also embody self-reflection (in the double sense of the word), lead the visitor astray, and confuse and confound the walkers who would thereby lose their way through evolution and, perhaps panicking a bit, wander amid diversity to their educational benefit.”²⁵ What Bal outlines is the position from which observers can construct the Museum narrative, but also see the construction of the museum narrative that includes they themselves as imaginary focalizers. In this operation, museal *mise en scène* opens up as *mise en abîme*, revealing another picture reflecting the act of observing itself as it was constructed by the Museum-as-storyteller and as it was perceived from the point of the implied focalizer – who in turn begins to reflect not only on the content of knowledge to be conveyed but also on the framework of its construction and its own position in it.

Museum as “reflection of the second order”

The same year Mieke Bal writes her critique of museums only several blocks from Central Park a place called Salon de Fleurus opened. This para-institutional space, arranged as a theme room containing copies of paintings of the modernist “great masters”, preserves and evokes memories Gertrude Stein’s former apartment at 27 Rue de Fleurus in Paris. A famous writer and art collector, Stein, together with her brother Leo, created during the early decades of the 20th century what Rebecca Rabinow of the Metropolitan Museum of Art – where parts of Stein’s acquisitions are frequently displayed – describes as something “more than just a collection – it was really the seed that began the spread of what we consider modern art throughout Western Europe and America.”²⁶

In its very setup, the New York Salon de Fleurus – as a recreation, a replica of Stein’s living room – is designed to confront the visitor with the problem of copy, and in so doing raise some key questions about the seemingly indisputable notions of art museum as well of artwork and artist. It displays only copies of the artworks, which, though they convey meaning as articulated within (the) art history, serve their purpose of standing as examples, specimens or artefacts that illustrate and illuminate modern art history. The whole room, representing the “birthplace” of the modern art narrative – that was subsequently appropriated (in its material form of paintings) and articulated (in the form of modern art history) by the Museum of Modern Art – is a reproduction designed to be a copy, thus mirroring, redoubling and reflecting the art history in question. “A copy could short-circuit the history of art. Instead of being chronological, implying development and progression, art history could become a loop... If an original is a reflection of reality, then its copy is a

²⁴ Mieke Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off”, p. 562

²⁵ Ibid., p. 572

²⁶ Susan Stamberg, “For Gertrude Stein, Collecting Art Was a Family Affair”, on NPR Radio quoting Rebecca Rabinow, <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/10/141428960/for-gertrude-stein-collecting-art-was-a-family-affair>.

reflection of a reflection, or a reflection of the second order. [T]he purpose of a fake is to conceal, whereas a copy proposes to reveal. A fake is essentially opportunistic – it does not question the system: undetected, it is the original; uncovered, it is discarded as a forgery. On the other hand, a copy is out in the open, obvious and blunt; once it is incorporated into the system, it starts questioning everything.”²⁷ Quite conveniently, there is always a copy of Walter Benjamin’s *Recent Writings (1986-2013)* lying open somewhere there that can help us understand the critical apparatus of this Salon.²⁸ Here, Benjamin’s writings revolve around the idea of Museum as the creator of art and the narrator of its history. He traces the birth of the art museum at the beginning of the 16th century and the establishment of Belvedere Romanum as museum,²⁹ when the very act of transferring antique artefacts into a space specially organized for the “aesthetic enjoyment” of its visitors made them works of art. Moreover, that particular display was considered exemplary of what an art piece should be, therefore suggesting or imposing a definition of art. Soon enough, art was dissociated from the guild system and given an elevated position above mere craft.³⁰ Hence, alongside ushering in the notion of art, the museum also fashioned the notion of artist: “A painter or

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Recent Writings: 1986-2013*, New Documents, Vancouver and Los Angeles, 2013, pp. 22-23

²⁸ The walls of the New York Salon, perhaps as small as Stein’s original place, covered with copies of grand masterpieces recreates the atmosphere, if not monumental quality, of a proper Museum. There is a strong sense of “timelessness” to such a setup. But, as we read in Benjamin’s *Recent Writings*, this is an illusion, since there is no such thing as a “timeless masterpiece”, and furthermore, although the “Art Museum can be seen as a timeless repository of exceptional works of art”, it is likewise an illusion. He observes that despite frequently changing and updating the history they represent, Museums themselves are perceived as timeless and not a subject of change. Benjamin adds that “to go to the museum was to see the past, arranged as history, which is fixed and unchangeable. Of course, this was just a ‘temporary timelessness’, since the technology, design, and aesthetics of museum displays change all the time. And thus the picture of the past keeps changing as well.” *Ibid.*, p. 36. While this sounds like a straightforward observation and a simple truth, it is not apparent or self-evident. This is perhaps another illustration of how significant insights are easily neglected in the presence of a strong narrative such as that which Museums produce.

²⁹ “One day in 1506 AD, news about an excavation of an unusual statue reached the pope, and he immediately dispatched Sangallo and Michelangelo to the site. Sangallo instantly recognized the priest Laocoon and his sons, mentioned in Pliny’s writings, the unfortunate characters of the mythical Troy. Not too long after, several more statues were placed in the garden in specially built niches on the surrounding walls, including the reclining Nile and Tiber, Apollo, Laocoon, Venus, Cleopatra, Torso... and suddenly in the very heart of Christendom a vision of a completely different world was beginning to emerge, a vision that would have a profound impact on the entire Western world for generations to come... Those statues, previously almost invisible as scattered parts of an urban landscape, now displayed together, became ‘aesthetic objects’ admired primarily for their beauty. It was almost irrelevant why they had been made in the first place, what roles they once had played, what their internal narratives were. In today’s terms, we could consider these statues to be the first readymades and, in fact, the first objects of art, while the Belvedere Romanum could be understood as the first museum of art...” *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132

³⁰ “[T]he council of the ten-year-old king [Louis XIV] issued the ‘Arrêt du Conseil d’État’ on January 27, 1648. With this decision, painting and sculpture were declared to belong to the ‘liberal arts’ and so removed from the control of the guild system. From then on they were not in the category of cabinets and armors, but in the same category as astronomy, music, arithmetic, and grammar. These were all considered to be non-material and individually conducted activities, impossible to organize into guilds, and thus couldn’t have manufacturing standards. Now painting became the result of a rather reflective activity similar to poetry and not something valued because of the mastery of the hand – and so introduced the concept of a ‘learned artist’ instead of an ‘ignorant artisan.’” *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136

sculptor was not just a craftsman any more, but a unique and exceptionally gifted individual, an almost God-like creator called an artist.”³¹

As the Age of Discovery gave way to the Age of Great Colonial Powers, another important aspect of the museum was established – the institution of art history, with its own chronology (prehistory, Egypt, Antiquity, Renaissance, Baroque, neoclassicism, etc.) and own spatial distribution (and later, proposing new divisions according to national schools and international movements). Here we witness the institution of art museum creating a story of art – a notion and practice that up until then was non-existing. “Most importantly, this is the story that defines the very nature of art; it defines what art is. (...) Art is most likely a notion defined by the story called art history, and it exists only within that story.”³²

Benjamin seems to agree with the abovementioned observation by Mieke Bal that a museum display is always a narrative³³, a story that constructs (art) history. But, while Bal focuses on the rhetorical devices employed within the museum display, Benjamin radicalizes the notion of museum not only as the (hi)story teller of art but also as the creator of the very notion of art. “[I]t is the art narrative that gives meaning to any object (‘artefact’) it incorporates, supplying it with the legitimacy of a ‘work of art’. In fact, it is the narrative that is important, more than artefacts. It’s like branding. Art history itself is a brand. It is also a way of branding products (artworks).”³⁴ It is not only that the art museum tells *a* story of a certain period, nation or movement, it primarily articulates *the* history of art – the story of what art is, how to recognize it, how to understand the meaning of it and how to appreciate it.

On De-Artization and Meta-Museum ($x = M + m^Q$)

For Benjamin “art” is an historically and socially specific category: “We should consider that art itself is not a universal category, but an invention of Western culture that appeared out of the Enlightenment and was gradually imposed on all epochs and all (non-Western) cultures.”³⁵ The important point that Benjamin makes is that art as a notion exists only within the discourse of art history and materialized in a form of museum display. Indeed, all one can possibly say about art seems already defined by the structure of the discourse of art history. As this narrative over time became embedded in academic and public discourse and in art and educational institutions, a story of art told by the museum display became the only story of art; it established itself as a kind of sacred story that hinges on the convictions of its practitioners and consumers, thus becoming impervious to any perspective other than that of its disciples. “In other words, the question is how to move beyond art history, how to establish another platform from which we could see art history from the outside.”³⁶

³¹ Ibid., p. 134

³² Ibid., p. 144

³³ “[T]he notion of the ‘artist’ belongs to the art historical narrative itself, while the ‘curator’ and the ‘art historian’ are storytellers (narrators) of a kind. Art historians usually tell the story through texts, while curators tell it through exhibitions.” Ibid., p. 34

³⁴ Ibid., p. 37

³⁵ Ibid., p. 185

³⁶ Ibid., p. 32

Since for Benjamin museums are already places of re-contextualization of the existing (or newly made) objects – of transferring them from one context to another and assigning them a new “artistic” meaning by articulating them within a new art history narrative – to move outside it would largely consist in the re-contextualisation of artworks, that is, in their de-artization. What would be useful would be “[a] gradual detachment from the notion of art and an attempt to look at an artwork as a human-made specimen, as an artefact of a certain state of mind or cultural/political milieu. This approach should not be one of a passionate believer and admirer of art, but one that is a diagnostic, almost cold, approach of an ethnographer.”³⁷

Consequently, art museums would have to be transformed into institutions that reflect on art history as well as on the constitutive notions of artwork, artist and art itself. “[A] *meta-art* museum would be a museum where works of art are exhibited not as some kind of ‘sacred’ objects but rather ethnographically as specific artefacts of the Western culture that emerged out of the Enlightenment. This would be a museum that exhibits former works of art as *meta-art* artefacts (de-artization), while a *meta*-(art museum) would be some kind of a place where an art museum itself is the theme, the subject matter.”³⁸ This strategy of observer gaining better a understanding of something by observing both another observer observing something and observing that something himself does correspond with Mieke Bal’s proposal for explicit self-reflection by placing mirrors within museum displays. Benjamin proposes the following summary of the procedure: “Meta-level is a position M defined in relation to P as an outside position that at the same time could recognize and even incorporate position P. Meta-position M recontextualises position P by assigning a new layer of meaning to P while not entirely forgetting its previous meaning.”³⁹ And this is also where, again like the conclusions formulated by Bal, Benjamin thinks, at least in the beginning, that the confusion and sense of being lost in such a meta-operation is not only necessary, but also welcome, and beneficial for one’s future awareness and understanding.⁴⁰

Although Benjamin recognizes that this process will also result in a certain amount of unlearning, of “stepping back”, so to say (“in some ways, the “new society” will have premodern characteristics, while at the same time reflecting the fact that “not forgetting modernity” is one of its important components”), he is very clear that this meta-position is not about the simple destruction of the art narrative and the obliteration of the notion of art, but more about something resembling the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation). “When art history was being established, it didn’t forget the Christian narrative. It just recontextualised it. And these meta-artworks are not forgetting the narrative of art history – they might be one way of recontextualising it”. Eventually, “what we have is recontextualisation rather than a deconstruction of the historical narrative. While deconstructing is in some way closer to

³⁷ Ibid., p. 168

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 194-195

³⁹ Ibid., p. 193

⁴⁰ “You have something you call “known” as a place where you feel good and safe. And then you have “unknown” as some kind of dark and dangerous place on the other side of the border. The entire era of modernism could be understood as a process of pushing the boundaries and broadening the territory of brightness by turning this “unknown” into the “known” ... Now, we are dealing with works that actually pursue the opposite approach. They turn the “known” into the “unknown.” There are no more boundaries, and danger is no longer beyond some distant frontier. The very place where you stand and feel safe begins to look a bit strange; we recognize it but it is not the same.” Ibid., p. 35-36

‘forgetting,’ recontextualising might come closer to ‘remembering.’”⁴¹ Thus, future museums, or rather meta-museums, will be “places that change the way we establish collective memory and our understanding of the past. And the way we decide to remember the past, what kind of stories will become our memories, all that will determine what steps we are going to take towards the future.”⁴² All of this together produces a certain outlook towards the future, that is, one meta-future, which is marked by the proliferation of examining and manipulating meta-functions, leading towards the establishment of the “meta-institutions” of the future. Of course, all of this happens in meta-history, which “would reflect upon a history but it itself would not be based on chronology and the uniqueness of the characters, objects, and events it includes”. And according to such a scheme, art as we know it has to cease to exist.

The Art (of) Thinking After the Death of Art

This sudden abundance of (meta-)options leads us towards Luis Camnitzer and his educational proposition based on the concept of *art thinking*, something that is “much more than art: a meta-discipline that is there to help, expanding the limits of other forms of thinking.” Perhaps similar to that which Benjamin proposes – in a way, *taking a distance in order to get closer* – Camnitzer wants to first do away with certain clichés and acquired wisdoms, with “the dominating idea that art-making is reserved for a chosen few, that art is based on therapeutic self-searching, that anything an artist does is art, that whoever doesn’t understand an art product is a Philistine, and that art is an industry by and for a minute fraction of the world’s population”⁴³. He points out that there is an everyday practice whereby art is simply an expressive, communicative and cognitive device available to everyone, much like literacy. But if art, in order to be able to “serve the interests of colonization and the expansion of an art market,” is understood as some universal language – “a kind of Esperanto capable of transcending all national borderlines” – then “the idea of art as a plain language underlines a notion of it as a form of communication, and in this case, power is not granted to the market, but to those who are communicating.” Camnitzer concludes: “Put simply, good education exists to develop the ability to express and communicate. This is the importance of the concept of “language” here, the implication being that both art and alphabetization can be linked to nurture each other.”⁴⁴

In such a perspective “art is not really ‘art’, but a method of acquiring and expanding knowledge. Consequently, art should shape all academic activities within a university and not be confined to a discipline.”⁴⁵ Moreover, for Camnitzer “science is a mere subcategory of art.”⁴⁶ “Science is generally bound by logic, sequencing, and experimentation with repeatable

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 40-41

⁴² Ibid., p. 68

⁴³ Luis Camnitzer, “Thinking about Art Thinking”, *e-flux journal* #65, 2015 (http://supercommunity-pdf.e-flux.com/pdf/supercommunity/article_1148.pdf)

⁴⁴ Luis Camnitzer, “Art and Literacy”, *e-flux journal* #3, 2009 (http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_888842.pdf)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Luis Camnitzer, “Thinking about Art Thinking”

and provable results. Mostly it presumes that there is something knowable out there that can be instrumentalised and represented. It doesn't matter if it is in what in science is called Mode 1, being propositional, or Mode 2, being interventionist. Art is all of that, plus the opposite. It stays in both modes simultaneously. It creates itself while it allows the play with taxonomies, the making of illegal and subversive connections, the creation of alternative systems of order, the defiance of known systems, and the critical thinking and feeling of everything. More than any other means of speculation it allows us to travel back and forth seamlessly from our subjective reality to consensus and possible but unreachable wholeness. It allows a mix of the megalomaniacal delirium of unbound imagination with the humbleness of individual irrelevance."⁴⁷

What happens if we observe art as way of thinking unconstrained, either through scholastic or commonsensical rationalizations, open to venturing beyond the given and open to unforeseen possibilities? Camnitzer, both a long-time artist and educator, suggests approaching artworks in a way similar to what Benjamin terms *de-artization*. He, too, finds it important not to focus on objects, but on "all conditions and interests that generated them, and to understand the distribution of power and the interests they are serving," in order to "expand our knowledge and also perceive how the society we are living in is constructed."⁴⁸

Camnitzer sees the use of an artwork as a cognitive tool almost exclusively in a public situation, as an encounter of artwork, artist or curator, and audience: "Personally, I would prefer looking *around* the work of art to find out what conditions generated its existence." His description of the process is not unlike that of the game where by "trying to identify what question the piece is trying to answer, and to then answer the question themselves" lay viewers are, "through a process of problematisation placed on the same level with the artists". Most importantly, this is moment when both the artist and the viewer "embark on the same research".⁴⁹ Its main premise is egalitarianism – "a socialism of creation" – effectuated through a dialogical process. "The main aim should be to equip the public so that people become able to question and demystify, to explore the borderlines of their own knowledge and see how those borderlines may be moved outward. That is where 'art thinking' is more important than 'art making'."⁵⁰

Museums, as institutions with an educational role, are one of the ideal sites for Camnitzer's practice of art thinking; but he discovered first hand how difficult it can be to bring them to do it. "[Museums] pride themselves on having an educational program. However, the way it's done is very hypocritical. Educational programs are segregated from the curatorial activities and used as public relations offices. The focus is on expanding the consumer base as shown by circulation numbers easy to use for funding, rather than trying to have transformative effects that cannot be quantified. Working as a pedagogical curator for a museum I once proposed a project for the pedagogical presentation of an exhibition. This prompted the director (with applause of the curator) to say: 'This is a museum, not a school.' My reaction

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Luis Camnitzer: "Art Thinking", The Art Educator's Talk (<https://arteducatorstalk.net/en/?interview=luis-camnitzer-art-thinking-2>)

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

(besides resigning) was to come up with the statement: ‘The Museum is a School; the artists learns to communicate; the public learns to make connections.’ Using Photoshop, I superimposed it on the façade of the museum and sent the picture to him as revenge. I then realized that there was more to it, and now I’m trying to get the text on the façade of as many museums as I can, and presented as official museum statements.”⁵¹

Metadata of Metadata: Ways of Doing, Ways of Seeing, Ways of Thinking

Camnitzer, too, and in a very concrete manner, describes the opportunities created and afforded by understanding and manipulating metadata: “I discovered that working with descriptions of visual situations was much more efficient than making visual situations.”⁵² What does a metadata paradigm mean in this particular case? As the object remains an object and a subject of its own laws and disappears nowhere, what changes is not the object or the truth of its material form but the purpose and the meaning of the object. That is, what changes is the external of the object; its reason to exist, its power to influence some particular this or that, its ability to be, or not, a part of a particular story. The insights provided by Benjamin (“constitutive notions of art could not be constitutive notions of meta-art”) and Camnitzer (“art thinking is ...identifying a certain freedom of connections that allows me to understand things better”), may be paraphrased to describe the educational journey in which arrival at a meta-destination will be fostered by a freedom of connections and marked by the absence of the constitutive notions of the previous paradigm.

Trying to locate and follow the meta-knowledge emanating from Art and Museum simply for the purposes of discovering art as the principle of meta-education might perhaps be an interesting discovery – or a very strange loop; but would certainly produce consequences. Bal speaks of metamuseum and it’s metafunction, about the “incredible density of metarepresentational signs” and “metadiscursive implications”; Benjamin looks into the concept of “meta-history” and finds “meta-positions” and further, “meta-meta-positions” of art objects and actors in exploring the phenomena of “meta-artworks” or “Meta-Kunst”; meanwhile, Camnitzer outlines what might well be the most important function of art – that of “meta-discipline”: “Art thinking is much more than art: it is a meta-discipline that is there to help expand the limits of other forms of thinking. Though it’s something as autonomous as logic might be, and though it can be studied as an enclosed entity, its importance lies in what it does to the rest of the acquisition of knowledge.”⁵³

Just as having or looking at the data does not amount to knowledge, the existence of meta-data itself does not automatically produce meta-knowledge. This is especially true in the case of art thinking: it requires “more” (is it the (in)famous “excess” of art?) be involved in the process of data processing. But it is precisely this “more” as the ultimate product of ideology that remains elusive on the surface of analysis. That “more” (or perhaps the “excess of art”) would be precisely that which is perceived to be present in art but cannot be expressed (today) with the language of liberal arts. Just as importantly, there is nothing mystical or

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today – Luis Camnitzer on Art and Education in Context*, The Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, 2015 (<https://www.guggenheim.org/video/luis-camnitzer-on-art-and-education-in-context>)

⁵³ Luis Camnitzer, “Thinking about Art Thinking”

mythical connected with this “more”, or that should be involved in the explanation of this “more” but the notion of “more” itself. The trajectory traced throughout this research can be described as moving from “the ways of doing” to “the ways of seeing”⁵⁴ to “the way of thinking” It points to the transformation in our understanding of the nature of knowledge and the process of learning that will be based on the methods and principles implied by the paradigm of metadata. But it is important to inspect the parameters of such a progression in order to understand the “for whom?” part of the equation.

Time now to check back with the Afghan school kids left in that improvised classroom from the beginning of this text, or, if you like, the middle of the film. We were worried that they might have been confused by the lecture, by profane objects and complex concepts presented to them as the heights of a certain foreign culture. “Confusion is sometimes the first step towards learning,” Benjamin might have offered. So are people in the West exhibiting everyday stuff in galleries and claiming it as art? What do galleries have to do with revolutions, with artworks and politics? “Art thinking is ...identifying a certain freedom of connections that allows me to understand things better,” Camnitzer might repeat. But can anyone simply go around making claims as to what art is art with no other arguments than simply “I claim”? Perhaps they might try. Like the philosophical anecdote that suggests the possibility that contemplating a solitary drop of water will at some point inevitably result in the awareness of the existence of oceans, it can be said that the kids were, technically speaking, given a chance. But were they – really? And what was found lacking, or surplus, in such a proposition? In the end, Camnitzer offers up good advice, advice on which all invited guests to this textual investigation might agree: “In essence, one cannot educate properly without revealing the power structure within which education takes place. Without an awareness of this structure and the way it distributes power, indoctrination necessarily usurps the place of education.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Title of the well known book of 1972 (published by Penguin Books) and TV series of the same year (broadcast by BBC) written by the writer and artist John Berger.

⁵⁵ Luis Camnitzer, “Art and Literacy”, *e-flux journal* #3, 2009 (http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_888842.pdf)