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Now What?
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The Russian art historian and Orthodox priest Pavel Florensky wrote the following in his extraordinary but little-known book on icon painting entitled *Iconostasis* (after the wall in an Orthodox church that separates the altar from the nave, the realm of the invisible from the visible):

> Within ourselves, life in the visible world alternates with life in the invisible, and thus we experience moments—sometimes brief, sometimes extraordinarily fleeting, sometimes even the tiniest atom of time—when the two worlds grow so very near in us that the invisible world (still unearthly, still invisible) is breathing: and that both this and another world are dissolving into each other.[5]

In those brief moments where we might feel the breath of the invisible, an extraordinary paradox occurs: the Orthodox icon becomes a self-revelation of God Himself. As Florensky states, "Thus, the most persuasive philosophical proof of God's existence is the one the text books never mention: . . . There exists the icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev [the painter]; therefore, God exists."[6] It is in those still points that the emotional responses generally referred to as "Stendhal syndrome" occur: dizziness, confusion, crying, even hallucinations—when an individual is exposed to extraordinary works of art, to the breathing of the invisible. But these are moments of silence that can only experienced alone, without audio guides or text panels.

Klaus Ottmann
Independent Curator and Scholar

NOTES

This essay was originally presented as a lecture at SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico, October 18, 2005.

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree Books, 1980), 11.
2. Yves Klein, *Le Dépassement de la proplematique de l'art at autres écrits* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux arts, 2003), 80 (my translation).
3. James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 393.
4. James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 2-3.
5. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 33.
6. Ibid.

Now What?

> These were the invaluable assets that the people of Milwaukee entrusted to me. And they offered me something else as well, which is absolutely crucial for any architect. In the trustees of the Milwaukee Art Museum, I had clients who truly wanted from me the best architecture that I could do. Their ambition was to create something exceptional for their community.

> I hope that when the new Milwaukee Art Museum opens and people see its fully realized form, that they will feel we have designed not a building, but a piece of the city.
>
> —Santiago Calatrava

> Poverty in Wisconsin increased faster than in any other state in 2003 and 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau reported Tuesday, and Milwaukee climbed last year into the top 10 of the nation's poorest cities, reaching seventh.
>
> In Milwaukee, more than 62,000 of those living in poverty were children—41.3% of all the children in the city. That poverty rate for children ranks the city fourth in the nation, tied with Miami.
>
> —*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 30, 2005

It is not surprising that a society ambiguous about religious and war monuments would prefer the museum as a symbol of vitality, enlightenment, and reinvention. What is not as apparent is why cities—even relatively poor cities—are eager to secure the funds to pay for the famous architect and the construction of not just any museum but grand temples to culture.

The sacrifice might have something to do with elusiveness. Most modern museums would like to become incarnations of a city's greatness, but this greatness is hard to hold or to articulate beyond slogans and shopping districts: it is fleeting, untrustworthy, and rarely sensed by any but a lucky few. The trustees of museums and others in charge of the capital campaign do not respond to that uncertainty with humility but with its opposite: the modern museum aims to be undeniable, doubtless. The hope appears to be that, once built, the museum will show how the city overcame itself to be magnificent and, hopefully, magnanimous—the best aspect of the city preserved, Dorian Gray–like, by the semipermanence of architecture, crystallized dreams transcending social and economic problems.

These museums seem, in scale and sacrifice, almost pyramidal. But they have less clarity of purpose and consciousness of the frailty of greatness than those earlier resurrection machines. And maybe for these reasons, there is something at odds, something anticlimatic, about the finished building, which for many people hardens rather than softens moral doubts about cities' agglomeration of capital, sewers, and population.

Doubts that exist prior to the architecture always surface in the operation of the institution: doubts about the need for a huge museum, doubts about better uses for the public money, doubts about the condition of the arts. And so, mission statements and educational programs notwithstanding, the modern museum anxiously searches for its meaning—but never candidly. Instead, the institutions tend to hide problems behind appearances of certitude and scholarship, behind murky programming, so that anxiety can only be seen indirectly (and even then only briefly and against the efforts of marketing departments) through the firing of museum directors, the familiarity of curatorial choices, the exhibitionist exhibitions, and the "tough realities" of attendance-based programming.

It is possible that the opulent modern museum, rather than embodying the elusive greatness of the city, embodies, more properly, the question: *Now what?*

Programmatic Solutions

The cruelty and insistence of that question suggest why museums have a tendency to avoid self-conscious explorations of their reason for being, offering instead programmatic distractions. Of these, few are as effective as the crowd-pleasing exhibitions. While the isolation of the museum is fundamentally unaltered by esoteric presentations, which are inescapably unpopular, blockbuster exhibitions or oversimplified or sensational (in the banal meaning of the term) exhibitions are usually well-received by the public. Hence, many museums believe in those types of exhibitions, and their administrators and board members would argue that large audiences and the translation of difficult ideas into familiar representations are central to the mission of the institution. Thus, success is usually measured in numbers, even if other ideals are voiced in speeches and press releases: number of visitors, number of members, number of donors.

Another factor that is taken into account by museums in their programming, and that reins in the ambition for numbers, is the need for professional respect. If every exhibition was like the BMW motorcycles at the Guggenheim, which pleased the crowd but undermined (creative spins notwithstanding) the original mission of the institution, museums would have no respect—they would be nothing but fancy movie theaters.

The imperative of peer respect is frequently interpreted as a need for agreement with other museums on the nature of exhibitions, the artists to pursue, and the galleries to support. In my experience, many board members and curators act as if scholarship and sophistication can only be defined through agreement with the consensus, as if authority is exclusively a quality of the collective (an exclusivity that makes sense in practical terms but not in an ontological sense).

For the museum, authority begins with the structure itself, its monumentality usually more overpowering than sublime but always undeniably authoritative. This architectonic authority is enhanced by the power of those who support the museum financially, by the reverence afforded to cultural institutions, by the political support of the city, and by the peer respect mentioned earlier.

Few gestures exercise the authority of an institution more than its willingness to allow permission for others to pitch in their ideas. Thus, the function of the public, in some popular currents of museum philosophy, is not only to attend the exhibitions and contribute financially but also to be involved in defining museum policies. Hence, many recent plans have been created to make the museum, as David Carrier states, "part of a living culture" and capable of inspiring "truly democratic conversations." However, even a cursory observation of these "democratic" policies reveal that they are habitually superficial: the museum does not really relinquish its power but only appears to do so, and its empowering policies betray condescension and generalization of the "target audience."

So the answer to *Now what?* begins to form as an odd mixture of authority and community courting, exclusivity and democracy. It is pretense: pretense, above all, that the subjectivity of art and its presentation are not, after all, authority eroding and temple crashing; pretense that the staff of a museum can generate social change from their seat of privilege and isolation.

Peter Bürger defines "avant-garde" as the attempt to overcome the separation between the bourgeois institution of art and the sociopolitical sphere—an *attempt* that offers the museum the occasional frisson of having done something for "the people" without sacrificing prestige or comfort.[1]

Despite the moral flexibility of museums, balancing the benefits offered by generous board members and corporations with the need for peer consensus and with the desire to appear, or even be, progressive is perhaps an unsurmountable programming challenge. And so it is troubling that the best answer to *Now what?* becomes a philosophy where contradictions are presented as complexities and realism as a justification for cowardice.

Me in All of This

Fortunately for the image of the museum, most contemporary solutions to difficult problems seem to be similarly conflicted, my own included. My incursions into museums for exhibitions and acquisitions have rarely turned out the way I expected. And it is my own fault. I am moved by the vaults and rooms holding great works of art—that part that some museum experts find disposable—and I let myself think that only the highest judgment is at play in the institution, that the question *Now what?* embodied in the building has a luminous answer already in effect. But after a while, only the contradictions of the institution, the distraction, and the cowardice remain. Then, I usually retreat to the permanent collection galleries or to my studio—both uncertain, conflicted, and under siege.

I do not agree with David Carrier's statement that "we preserve old art because it makes the past real to us." Works of art do little for the past—more can be gathered about the past from a single newspaper page. The great work of art is always ahistorical and, therefore, always contemporary, always present. That is why we preserve them. The historical context is only important to that which has little bearing in what makes the work of art significant. Contexts, cultural and temporal, give curators and critics much to talk about and many stories to tell museum visitors, but they do not do much to reveal the great work of art in itself (*yes*, in itself) and why it refuses to lay down in time, like most other artworks do.

I am tempted to say that a great deal of confusion and misrepresentation of the museum world and its critics comes from language. It tends to be, after all, a very complex discussion argued through obscure terminology. For example, when David Carrier writes of "*truly* democratic conversations" and "radical utopian analysis," I wonder what could be the characteristics of a conversation that make it not only democratic but *truly* so? What is a utopian analysis? Is not analysis an inquiry? And does not an inquiry preclude or resist agendas, utopian or otherwise? And what makes it radical?

Although I have these concerns about language, my biggest contention with Mr. Carrier is that he has "every reason to be very optimistic about [the museum] future." The problems that interest me most about museums are the problems of fear and shallowness, and these manifest themselves in our intellectual moment as compensation. Compensation through consensus, grandness, and authority: the utopia, to use Mr. Carrier's word, of objectivity, decidedly frustrated by the incapacity to be clear. Authentic.

David Carrier opens the conclusion of his book with this quote from Arthur Danto: "The whole form and tenor of philosophical thought in the West was determined, once and for all, by the fact that its initiating—and finest—texts were dialogues." But I suggest that a different form and tenor of philosophy and thinking and, ultimately, courage was offered by the early geometric proofs—earlier than those dialogs that impressed Mr. Danto. These proofs were devoid of utopia but suggestive of fundamental truths, reason, and ethics; reason and ethics that can transcend being the subjects of democratic conversations to become an imperative to be clear and honest, two qualities that would do more for museums than most of the existing programs.

However, a committed ethical course devoid of opportunistic modifiers is not something I see coming to the typical museum soon. If the building embodies the question *Now what?* because of fanfare and expense, works of art embody the same question because they are an ethical demand; and, in my view, the future museum will only answer with appearances.

Enrique Martínez Celaya
Independent Artist

NOTE

1. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).