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BACK TO BABYLON: FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE MUSEUM

I.

Claiming that the museum is a place and an institution of enlightenment is a topos that permeates all relevant histories in diverse variants and is repeatedly made use of when the issue is to evoke its significance. Moreover, the usual populist criticism of the museum sails under the flag of 'enlightenment' as well. It is followed by more and more precisely differentiated educational programs and marketing campaigns which in the end have a single goal, namely, to confirm the museums in the state they are currently in.

However, the museums' present state – exceptions, as always, prove the rule – is anything but one that could enable and support enlightenment in the sense of Kant's *sapere aude*, for instance. What we have instead, particularly in the case of modernized museums, are institutions promising enlightenment but merely fobbing off their visitors with prettified information: The role the modern museum may once have played in enlightening the 'immature', no matter how they are viewed – one can indeed doubt this, since almost all museums primarily served to represent the wealthy – has today turned into an institution that, in the name of a falsely understood democratization, patronizes its visitors, smothers their curiosity and only allows rhetorical questions – in short, a kind of walk-round 3-D television at the level of a second-rate school.

One could easily leave the museums to the creative industries if it weren't for one element that makes them so special and so entirely different than the media, an element that has as yet not been touched: their collections and the knowledge which, based on them, was able to be generated from these collections and is documented in them. These stocks are the foundation for a real chance – against the ubiquitous trend of their being mediatized – of turning museums into epistemologically exciting, even dangerous venues.

II.

If culture, quite generally speaking, is the effort to understand the conditionality of one's own existence, meaning, for example, the ability to reflect the ego as a self, the group as a community, or mere activity as action which is in one way or the other conscious of itself, then this definition implies that the various cultural artefacts themselves can always only be conditional and respectively possess a specific form. These forms, however, not only differ in ethnological, historical and technological terms, but also according to the senses they activate and address, the dimensions on which they are based and the technological state – in regard to the overall development within a culture area – they correspond to. As variegated as the corresponding forms and their diverse combinations may be, what all cultural manifestations appear to have in common is the endeavour to express or visualize a whole – even if only as a void around which everything revolves. This effort to create a whole or to relate something particular to a whole reveals a utopian ideal on which any cultural product feeds in whatever way, or to which it at least claims to refer.

In the way it has been developed in Western industrialized countries, the museum is a comparatively young form of cultural reflection. Yet against the background of rapid technological progress in the field of image-producing methods and the mass media, it appears quite ponderous and outdated, insofar as it is typically bound to rooms in specific places and still predominantly deals with objects. Museums are additionally characterized by not only contending to represent a whole but by the inclination to realise it as well. In this respect they can be compared foremost to the university or the library. Hence, museums always possess a utopian character, at least in conceptual terms. It is typical of them to have developed a specific set of rules for handling objects,

while not having found a shape of their own as specific spaces or institutions. What distinguishes the museum instead, especially in its early history, is that it borrowed from canonized architectural forms, e.g., the temple, the palace or the library; that it could be developed in spaces and buildings used differently beforehand; or – particularly in recent times – that it is able to present itself in the form of more or less freely designed, autonomous architecture.

Characteristic of museums, then, is that they appear as individual units, in all respects – as collections, as specific spaces or buildings and not least due to their own history. For this reason, museums as *individual institutions* almost inevitably come into conflict wherever they are confronted with the demands of a general audience schooled by the mass media and are questioned as to what they can do or mean for this audience.

This raises the question of whether (publicly financed) museums can secure their future only if they submit to the imperatives of mass-media societies, i.e., as already mentioned briefly above, adapt their Esperanto, remodel themselves to showrooms, stage events, and mask their individual character as far as possible, or merely market themselves as so-called unique selling propositions; or whether it wouldn't make more sense in the long run and in the interest of the general audience, despite the current success of such strategies, to strengthen the specific features outlined above, to work them out and to push for them aggressively as alternatives to the medial forms of reflection.

III.

We have some knowledge of historical Babylon, and the tales, myths and metaphors based on the relevant verses of the Old Testament are also well-known. Yet what still remains fascinating about Babylon and keeps it alive in our minds is the intertwinement of facts and fictions which under the name of Babylon comprise a drama of humanity, one which can appear topical time and again and serve as a projection space for developments in our age as well. Therefore, allow me to add a further speculation to the existing ones. It focuses on a moment about which no detailed information or documents exist: the moment the so-called confusion of tongues commenced.

I understand this moment as one of aesthetic rationality, as a moment of fundamental dissociation and forced reflection, and thus as the dawn of culture and history in the sense outlined above: It is the moment a large unity, represented by the common language of the Babylonians and the tower they jointly built, falls apart – be it through the intervention of God or due to internal dynamics – and we are faced with fragments and a diversity replacing the whole and what is common. In other words, the moment of the confusion of tongues is one of ambiguity and ambivalence: What is shared, the one language, is lost; what is gained are new, unique languages and thus the possibility to differentiate – something which fundamentally calls into question the effort of working on an overarching whole.

Finally, what the moment of the confusion of tongues entails is – similar to the story of Noah's Arch – a before and after. Yet in contrast to this earlier, no less impressive account, the Babylonian period after differs fundamentally from the period before: While the story of the Flood and Noah's Arch can be understood as the restitution of the world in an ideal state that had been lost, the end of the Babylonian story remains open and the earlier state becomes a utopia – which henceforth humanity seeks to regain.

IV.

If in the ancient *mouseion*, the place where the Muses danced, one can recognize the museum's performative myth of origin and in the story of Noah and his Arch the other,

scientific one,¹ a further mythical motif determining the shape of the museum can be derived from the moment of the Babylonian confusion of tongues: it is the status of ambiguity to which all things included in a museum are subjected and through which they above all distinguish themselves from their status in practical everyday life.

Ambiguous things are difficult to handle, they make one uncertain and appear threatening. Civilization is the technique of stripping ambiguous things and contexts of what makes them threatening and using them as instruments for certain purposes. If these purposes no longer exist or are no longer understood, that which has been civilized in one way or another will at one point become ambiguous again and possibly turn into a cultural artefact: an object of reflection on the meaning it has for the context from which it stems and for the context in which it is perceived.² In conceptional terms, viewed as a format, we have created a place with the museum where not only this two-sided reflection is performed but where we can additionally reflect on the manner of and the reason for something specific becoming an object of reflection. The foundation of this multi-digit possibility of reflection, however, is the basic principle of museal practice, which – in contrast to scientific, artistic and practical work – excludes physical operations on or alterations of the fragments taken in whatever way from reality and makes their preservation its goal: The objects are aestheticized through their musealization, which initially means nothing more than that they remain withdrawn from all practical functions and can only be treated symbolically. They therefore retain – at least theoretically – their ambiguity; and the way they are treated, their classification in one context or another, can remain comprehensible.

But the possible mediatization of museums abolishes precisely this potential, which any kind of musealized stock possesses, and leads to the renewed instrumentalization of the objects as information, to their trivialization and civilizing in line with the economy of attention.

V.

The most common form of trivializing objects within the framework of the museum is to classify them in historical taxonomies. This type of treatment is characteristic of the modern museum, it is applicable to all things and so popular because, by shunting things off into the historical, not only can they be robbed with ease of their effects on a respective present, but the present, modernity, is what is hereby produced in the first place.³ A second, no less effective form of trivialization, frequently appearing in combination with an historicizing one, is presenting things in the mode of artworks. It detaches the things from even the last possible references to their or our reality, it reifies them to mere objects of contemplation and thus makes them bend to arbitrary attributions; yet this is precisely something that did not apply to Duchamp's ready-mades, on which this form of dressing has unfortunately been modelled.⁴

Seen as a ubiquitous and constantly growing system, the museum is therefore the new Tower of Babel which we are building; a Great Construction whose taxonomies we use to subjugate everything from the past to our present-day and, by attempting to order the world in retrospect and belatedly, celebrate our own immaturity as historical subjects.

¹ Cf. Understanding Museums - Das Museum als autopoietisches System, in: Michael Fehr/Clemens Krümmel/Markus Müller (eds.), Platons Höhle - Das Museum im elektronischen Zeitalter, Cologne 1995, p. 11-20.

² Cf. on the following: Michael Thompson: Mülltheorie. Über die Schaffung und Vernichtung von Werten. (1979), Essen 2003; M.F., Müllhalde oder Museum - Endstationen der Industriegesellschaft, in: Museum - Verklärung oder Aufklärung, Loccumer Protokolle 52/1985, p. 113-128; strongly expanded version in: Michael Fehr/Stephan Grohé (eds.), Geschichte-Bild-Museum. Zur Darstellung von Geschichte im Museum, Cologne 1989, p. 182-196.

³ Cf. Donald Preziosi, The Art of Art History, in: same (ed.), The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, Oxford, New York, 1998, p. 510.

⁴ Cf. the texts in note 2.

I therefore wish the museums a Babylonian moment, a moment of dissociation of the structures of thought and knowledge, a moment that would make the ideology of the *language of objects* disintegrate and allow many different ways of speaking about the objects. It would be a moment of enlightening the museum in the name of aesthetic rationality in the sense of Baumgarten and Kant, as a place where we, to use the words of Donald Preziosi, seek to understand "*what we see when we see ourselves seeing museums imagining us.*"⁵ Yet as far as I can see, only artistic work has the means and possibilities on hand to realise such an enlightenment of the museums.

Translation from German by Karl Hoffmann

⁵ Donald Preziosi, *Haunted by Things. Utopias and Their Consequences*, lecture held on 03/03/2001, Hohenhof Hagen