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Museums of the Future as Surprise Generators: A Foresight

Colophon

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Preliminary remark

From a philosophical point of view, it is impossible to think about the future. Future is the mode of time that remains stubbornly closed to us, opaque. We cannot experience the future. What we as human beings are capable of, however, even in cooperation with machines, is to develop ideas and models of possible futures. So, when we talk about future presences in the following, it always concerns imaginations, concepts, designs, however realistic they may seem.

Time Machine Museum

No question about it—the *TV Buddha* of 1974 is one of the masterpieces of art with media in the 20th century. The installation is also Nam June Paik's most iconic work. For many critics and art historians, it even represents the media art genre of video art. Accordingly, the work has been interpreted in many ways: as a clash between cultures, as Paik's ironic commentary on the circular coherence of cybernetics, as an ingenious puzzling of the image-body-medium relationship under the conditions of the artwork in the age of its infinite technical (re)producibility, in which, among other things, the viewer is integrated into the pictorial event,[1] or as a clash between Far Eastern mysticism and Western technology. (The latter is not coherent because electronic television was not first invented in Western Europe or the USA, but in the East, namely in St. Petersburg in Russia). With regard to my thoughts on future museums, Paik's installation is above all interesting as a special time machine and thus as a model for the museum itself.

The magic of the *TV Buddha* is fed among other things by the fact that two time arrows meet in the closed-circuit installation. One of the arrows points back about two and a half thousand years into the deep time of Zen Buddhism. (In 1974, Paik explicitly accentuated the deep time perspective by not using any arbitrary current Buddha figure, but an antique one from the 18th century, which he himself had acquired as an art object). The other time arrow points to a possible future through the presence of the electronic Buddha image in the monitor. The time-image, which is constantly being generated anew in the electron tube, is not only fragile and fleeting. It is equally manipulable and variable, which Paik himself practiced many times. In the black and white control monitor, the abstraction from the three-dimensional body of the Buddha figure, which also already has the status of abstraction from the real Buddha, becomes visible. With its elliptical time-space construction, the installation offers a concept of time that is in principle both mythical and magical—time does not run linearly but dynamically, like a spiral, definitely without beginning and without end.

The clash of the two time perspectives can also be understood as a tension between "facta" and "futura," a tension between the limited world of the existing/given and the infinitely diverse spaces of possibility which we define as the future and which we want to see preserved as open fields of action as possible. The museum of the past is primarily dedicated to the "retro-spective" arrow of time, the world of the deep temporal factual.

1
"Zen and art are the same," Hans Belting quotes a Zen text from the 15th century in his precise reflection of Paik's masterpiece: Buddha's Mirror, or: In Search of Paik, in Belting, *Scenarios of Modern Art and its Open Boundaries*, selected and introduced by Peter Weibel (Hamburg: Philo & Philo, 2005), 141-153.

Museums of the future focus on the "time machine" in a different way, namely "prospectively." In connection with the long-gone present, they stage presences that may still be ahead of us. Instead of the highly culturally conventionalized juxtaposition of facts and their narrations between the artist's biography, work, and context, a radical turn to "dreaming forward" would take place, as the philosopher Ernst Bloch accentuated the potential of utopia. The projection into the future must take the passage through the present and its agenda, its problems, challenges, aggregates of freedom and happiness and link them with the utopian potentials of the past. This is how "surprise generators" are created.[2] To be able to develop into such a generator should be the minimum requirement of a museum of the future.

Cultura Experimentalis and Transversal Knowledge

Nam June Paik had several identities. "I am the many(Ich bin die Vielen)." This is how the philosopher and artist Elisabeth von Samsonov characterized the subject identity of the young painter Egon Schiele at the beginning of the 20th century and thus implicitly also met Paik's subject draft. (To be the "many" has been strong anticipation of the already existing and coming subject identities.) Among many other identities, Paik was a modern alchemist. In infinite processes of decomposition, mixing, composition, and construction, he worked over decades on the heterogeneous materials of which the experiential world is composed, including their signs and signals, their images, sounds, and structures. The electronic—in connection with its poetic energy—has taken on a similar function in his work as the philosopher's stone, the "lapis philosophorum," had in classical alchemy. The digital is the last analogy to the alchemical formula for gold. The great filmmaker and critic Jean-Paul Fargier wrote about the videotape *Allan and Allen's Complaint*, which Paik produced together with his partner Shigeko Kubota in 1982. The electronic and the digital serve to transform common matter into something nobler.

In this way, the material of his sculptures and found footages, which are not separated and not mixed at the beginning of the work process, is given a value that makes them richer, turns them into cult objects, and thus ultimately transcends them. This was the noblest work of the old sorcerer's apprentices and adepts: to enrich the world by changing it to its advantage, including the transformation of one's own person from a profane sinner to a spiritual personality. To achieve this, the laboratory apprentices of alchemy had to follow a laborious path that took them through at least seven stages to reach their desired goal—the authors of the treatises who describe the process called the last stage of metamorphosis "projection."

Paik's radiant sculpture "Mercury," created in 1991, etymologically represents the market, the mercantile, with which Paik used to flirt often. Mercury, however, is mainly the name given to both fascinating and dangerous substance "Quicksilver." In the laboratories of the alchemists, it was one of the three basic principles that were decisive for their art. It stood for the combination of the elements air and water, for the principle of liquefaction and evaporation, the volatile, the mobile, the impermanent, even the melting of metals. In Roman mythology, Mercury is also the transmission of the ancient Egyptian demigod Hermes Trismegistos, the three times great Hermes, the spiritual father of all alchemists. Mercurius was the Roman equivalent of the Greek Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Right after his birth, he invented the lyre by stretching strings over the shell of a turtle and playing them. He was revered for his deviousness, his trickiness, and extraordinary rhetoric, but also for his agility. He was given wings and was made a god of traffic and travel, bandits and highwaymen. Because he could put others to sleep with his herald's staff, he was also praised as the god of sleep and dreams. Mercury is the ideal "media god." He escapes clear definition, as does the raunchy field of media itself. Athanasius Kircher

2
This is a concept coined originally by the biochemist Mahlon Hoagland (1990) for the characterization of the epistemic value of experiments. It lies at the root of the understanding of artistic practice as incessant experimental praxis.

was a poly-mathematical universal scholar from the provincial German town of Geisa and the director of the powerful Jesuit College in Rome in the second half of the 17th century. He built up the first "media museum" as a fascinating chamber of curiosities from extremely heterogeneous showpieces of nature, art, technology, and science, venerated Mercury as the god of the "successful finding."

With Mercury, Paik leads us to another crucial facet of how future museums can act as "surprise generators." The core of the alchemical activity is an experiment. Yes, it is fair to say that alchemy and "cultura experimentalis" are complementary concepts. In the alchemistic laboratory, work is done at high risk to produce something new and noble from the profane given material. For the posthuman social conglomerates, "testing" has become the defining paradigm. Tests consolidate what is not yet suitable for the functional whole. They should help to avoid failure and increase effectiveness. Failure (with dignity) is inherent in the experiment, however. The experiment and the courage to develop it further as a culture connect the advanced arts with the advanced sciences.

The Museum of the Future should see itself as an artistic and scientific "medium." The knowledge it generates is not identical to the scientific knowledge developed at ordinary universities. Rather, it is a "transversal knowledge" that stands diagonally to the disciplines and oscillates between abstraction and sensual material. The long history of alchemy from the ancient Egyptians to ancient China and the early modern period in Europe teaches us this too: the division between the thinking (abstract) and the extended (concrete) things is neither wise nor attractive for the future. Mental and physical things develop in constant interaction. The most advanced explorations of "Artificial Extelligence" are precisely practicing this insight as "Embodied Intelligence."

Hybrid and Networked

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is absurd to doubt that present and future museums should face up to new telematic conditions of communication. Pioneering institutions such as the German Titanic of Media Arts, the ZKM in Karlsruhe have not only been integrating media technology-based art into their exhibitions for decades—from single-channel video works to complex installations and, above all, computer-generated works and processes. They also started to (re)act on the changing technological and social challenges with their personnel and technical infrastructure and their exhibition concepts.

For almost two years, between 2017 and 2019, *Open Codes* was an elaborate field of experimentation for stratagems that will help to shape future museums in various combinations. Peter Weibel's project had nothing more to do with the administration of cultural heritage. Visitors of the event paid no admission fee, and the exhibition and workshops were free for everyone. Within the exhibition architecture, spaces were created for physical relaxation, sporting activities, and enjoying fruit and refreshments, which were also freely accessible. In return, the visitors helped to design the exhibition. They acted as active participants within the "World as Data Field," as the subtitle for the second part of the event at the ZKM was called. Not only was everything allowed to be touched here. The use of hands, dancing fingertips on keyboards and touch screens as well as whole moving bodies, were absolutely desired in many installations.

I remember very well how such new qualities of a nervous, rumbling museum business literally challenged traditional exhibition cultures. On the floor above *Open Codes*, we presented *Dia_Logos: Ramon Llull and the Ars Combinatoria*.[3] The valuable centuries-old manuscripts and pictures, unique calculating machines, and sculptures were not allowed to be touched but only viewed, sometimes even under difficult lighting

3
I curated the exhibition together with Amador Vega and Peter Weibel. It was also shown in a smaller format at the Catalan CCCB and in Lausanne, Switzerland. The catalogue book, an ambitious contribution to Llull research and the genealogy of intelligent machines, was published by Minnesota University Press in 2019.

conditions. Nevertheless, there were also elements of interaction with computers in this exhibition, e.g., to demonstrate the art of combining, as Llull thought up in the 13th/14th century. The supervisory staff was particularly challenged. They had to constantly oscillate between the two different usage profiles of contemplation on the one hand and extended hands on participation on the other.

The permanent prevention of physical encounters and, above all, touching has led to an enormous thrust in virtualization worldwide in 2020. Many institutions between Seoul, Shenzhen, New York, London, Copenhagen, or Paris have greatly expanded their online activities. They not only organize exhibition tours in the virtual space of the Internet but also festivals, film series, lectures, discussions, and workshops. Paik has condensed and anticipated such transformations in his 51-channel video installation *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii* (1995). Museums can become hotspots of the monetary transfer of news, art, and knowledge. Museums are transforming themselves into virtual cinemas (real cinemas have already been integrated into many museums anyway) and, above all, into broadcasting pulpits. They take over those tasks of "universal education" which universities and public broadcasting stations have long since abandoned. They convey extraordinary, bulky, provocative, challenging, and resistant experiences in acquiring knowledge and aesthetic wealth. In their most beautiful forms, museums of the future will be stimulating and exciting "thingking spaces(Denkräume)."

The interiors of future museums can be imagined as intelligent environments that are attuned to the internal memory archives of their users and their aesthetic desire machines and can react by coupling or colliding the individual memories of knowledge and experience with the museums' thoroughly digitized object containers. This has to do with the fact that opening up access to the state/publicly administered legacies of art and culture has become one of the most important paradigms of progressive museum policy. The hidden collection containers of museums are transmuting from the opaque secret state archives, accessible only to a privileged few, to a "display" for the heterogeneous "facta" that it preserves, maintains, and exhibits, freely available and playable at least on the surface of images and data.

The opening of the museums should not only be understood vertically, i.e., in the perspective of the deep time of aesthetic wealth. The further I penetrate into the layers of past presences, the clearer it becomes how the various cultures of knowledge and form were interlinked in the past. For the exhibition *Allah's Automata - Artifacts of the Arab Islamic Renaissance (800-1200)*,[4] we reconstructed, among other things, one of the complex audio-visual automata that the engineer Al-Jazari designed in northern Mesopotamia around the year 1200 and described in detail in a manual from 1206.[5] The so-called elephant clock, which measured the hours, wrote and announced them aloud, presented in condensed form the entire world knowledge of the time that had gone into the construction of the automaton. The design of the hydraulically and pneumatically driven automaton explicitly addresses the knowledge cultures of India, Egypt, Greece, Persia, and of course, the Arab countries. A relapse into, for example, Eurocentric or even nationalist constructs for the contextualization of the objects kept and shown in museums will no longer be possible in the future or will be highly embarrassing.

Beyond the Central Perspective View

From an architectural perspective, museums are generously designed time containers. The artistic artifacts, the 'objectified time' from past presences, are exhibited in them, while the visitors are more likely to take a journey 'inwards' when encountering them. Exhibition and contemplation form a delightful paradox, which can be used as a starting

4
The exhibition was shown at the ZKM Karlsruhe for nine months, between 2015 and 2016. Hatje & Cantz published the catalogue edited by myself and Peter Weibel with the same title.

5
Ibn al-Razzāz al-Jazarī, *al-Jāmiʿ bayn al-ʿilm wa-'l-ʿamal an-nāfiʿ fī ṣināʿat al-ḥiyal* (A Compendium on the Theory and Practice of the Mechanical Arts), manuscript, 1206, Topkapı Sarayı Library, Istanbul, MS Ahmet III 3472.

point not only for exciting discourses, but also for future architectures and space-time organisations.

The view, which has become classic since the second (European) Renaissance, follows the laws of central perspective. Museums have traditionally been built under this symbolic meta-perspective. The Prado in Madrid, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the Louvre in Paris, or the Old National Gallery in Berlin — they all celebrate the central perspective view, which is able to harmonize the heterogeneous and bring order to the chaos and uncontrollability of artistic expression. The energetic center from which the entire building and the individual rooms are organized is defined by the visual point of view of the respective museum, which is ideological in the worst case, idealistic in the best. In the new buildings of recent decades, the basic construction has gradually dissolved in many buildings. From Frank Gehry to Zaha Hadid, from Daniel Libeskind to Jean Nouvel, the strictly organized conditions of viewing and movement in the museum have in some cases been radically transformed—through the inclusion of sloping, declivitous interspaces, elliptical or spiral structures, spatial breaks, and deliberate deconstruction of the culture of the right angle.

Such architectures of the late 20th and early 21st centuries mark the transition to far more radical transformations. From one of my seminars at the Berlin University of the Arts, which had been dedicated to present and future "an-archives"[6] as art containers, future architect Bernhard Resewski developed concepts for mobile and even flying memory-containers such as zeppelins as his final project. Their walls should be intelligent skins that can be activated and used in the dialogue between visitors/participants and collections. Using a corresponding interactive network, individuals or groups can put together individual exhibitions in preparation for a visit to the museum and choose dialogue partners who will communicate with them about the works. Reference works from the history of the arts or synchronous references from other cultures can be included in the dialogue as virtual realities. For my own work as an archaeologist of media and the arts, I would like to have a projection room that would be connected to the library and the archive of the museum, and on whose walls I could call up, by means of gestures and voice, the image and sound objects that I needed, for example, for a lecture.

But the other side of such developments must also be taken into account. With a high degree of audio-visual dynamization of their interiors and exteriors, their depots and exhibition halls, museums become deserted at the same time. Cashiers become as superfluous in cashless transactions as the classic museum attendant. Monitoring and control functions would of course no longer be carried out by people but by machines and programmes. Future museums can become rationalized machines unless the freed capacities can be converted into newly emerging professional identities—from high-level art historians with strong scientific and technological interests, artistic engineers, and passionate art educators to designers of permanently changing spatial situations.

There are no real surprises in any of these "dispositifs" yet—except those that will have clever, art-critically trained intelligence amplifiers built into the technologies. The most important change in museums of the future will be to question themselves as institutions and develop new tasks. If the subtle juxtaposition of (arti)facts, the discreet retelling of artists' biographies and historical contexts is to be replaced by a constant encounter with the "radical present" and its challenges. Then the training of new skills will be necessary, some of which we can already sense. I only sketch a few of them.

6
This concept is discussed in Zielinski, *AnArchive(s) — A Minimal Encyclopaedia on Archaeology and Variantology of the Arts and Media*, ed. Claudia Giannetti for Edith-Russ-House for Media Art in Oldenburg, in cooperation with E. Fürlus (Cologne: König, 2014, bilingual).

As good as some of this may work in digital networks—thinking, designing, aesthetic action must by no means be domestic and logically subjected to the domestic economy. In the museum, everything should remain public and thus potentially negotiable by and with everyone. The constant attempt to move from the closed to the open, a journey into the unknown, allows us to see the foreign within ourselves like an ethnologist and to let the "continuity between matter and imagination" unfold. "Matter and dreams take paths that are not the same, but that correspond to each other."[7] As a materiologist, I agree with the Arab polymath and philosopher Avicenna (980-1037) on the assumption that form is the "fiery truth" of matter. What is also possible as a material sensation is by no means exhausted by what has become real. From this arises the possibility and nourishes the freedom to continue dreaming forward.[8]

However, foresight cannot focus only on technology and its further development. It also implies that both future museums and their visitors and users will need to develop skills to meet current and future challenges. By this, I mean skills that cannot be taught and learned like subjects in schools or disciplines at universities, but faculties in the direct sense of the word: fields of energy, motivation, and irritation in the indissoluble unity of "poiesis" and contemplation, of doing and thinking. They have the character of temporary "transversal cuts,"[9] of "diagonal practices" capable of mediating between the arts and sciences.

"Dignity" is the most important faculty, whose uncompromising development we must learn to practice again. Both as operators, as well as visitors or curators of a museum. This faculty is all about maintaining and developing comprehensive respect as a principle of life. It is celebrating—in thinking and designing and making—the appreciation of the other. This other includes the other culture, the other origin, the other thinking, the other sex, in the age of the "Anthropocene" and "Novocene,"[10] the other of nature and technology. Museum work of the future would then be permanent practice in respectful attitudes and actions. Their objects would be organized horizontally rather than vertically. The arts and their various origins between Asia and Europe, Africa and the Americas, Antarctica, and Australia should form an open horizon that is not obstructed by hierarchies and hegemonies.

Intellectual and artistic activity, aware of the interactions between the various human agencies and the agents of nature and technology, requires the formation of a new faculty for the "atmospheric." We are a part of which we live on planet Earth. The atmosphere is our "host." We need the atmosphere for (survival) life, but it does not need us existentially. It gets along without us. For the atmosphere, we have not only acquired a potentially viral character. This radicalizes our commitment to it.

Unclear and unexpected events require the formation of extraordinary competencies for "unusual measures (Ungewöhnliche Maßnahmen)." There have been activist groups that respond to this need time and again in the 20th century—from the Stray Dogs in pre-war St. Petersburg to the Situationists in France and SPUR or the Centre for Political Beauty (ZPS) in Germany. They are needed again and again to intervene in overly saturated conditions and to irritate comfortable harmonies. Their most important field of action will continue to be urban communication, especially under the conditions of the prevailing telematic conditions of physical distance. As early as the 1960s, Paik created an artificial agent who, together with his inventor, acted in public places and made them unsafe. The *Robot K-456*, named after a Mozart piano concerto from the famous musical Köchelverzeichnis, recited speeches of the then American president and excreted peas, similar to Vaucanson's famous mechanical duck from the 18th century, and practiced in the fragile mortal elegance of a remote-controlled artificial being.

7
I am quoting and following here Roger Caillois, *Die Krake. Versuch über die Logik des Imaginativen (The Octopus. Experiment on the Logic of the Imaginative)* (Munich, Vienna: Hanser, 1986), 140. The book was published in the French original (*La Pieuvre*) as early as 1973.

8
Forward dreaming is a rhetorical figure from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, to whose re-reading of Avicenna I refer above: Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1952).

9
Cf. Roger Caillois, *Méduse & Cie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), German by Brinkman & Bose, Berlin (2007), 50. Here Caillois develops the demand to "give diagonal sciences a chance" (S. 52).

10
Vgl. James Lovelock, *Novacene — The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2018).

Under the conditions of advanced networks of communication relations and the increasing technification of our ways of life, such unusual measures can articulate themselves in a faculty that we can call "Critical Engineering," together with international activists such as Julian Oliver, Daniil Vasiliev and Gordan Savicic. By this, we mean an activity that is as constructive as it is critical, theoretical as well as practical, that follows from intervening thinking and that is appropriate to the elaborate networked machines. It is capable of reinterpreting artifacts and the technical systems in which they are embedded or occupying them in an alien way. It would be a logical continuation of a faculty for "pataphysics," which would be particularly suited to museums of the future.

Such a faculty is closely related to techno- and poetological work on "systems that are not," or rather, "difficult to censor." This would involve the permanent confrontation with those information and communication technologies which, on the one hand, have a major influence on the work of museums, but which, on the other hand, are realized by the mechanisms of the rule in advanced capitalism as data policy and control. Only through a critical application of these technologies against their own monitoring and control mechanisms can they be exposed effectively. Something which everyone agrees with, because they need the comprehensive networks for their functioning, would become an object of controversy and critical discourse.

If it is the case that, under the sign of expanded possibilities of intervention at the interface of media people and media machines, creativity becomes a basic social competence. Although it is phased out in art itself, the traditional model of the artist becomes a general guiding model of social action. Then it is advisable to at least work on complementary identities. The competencies that artists and intellectuals will increasingly need in the future can be grasped (especially after the 2020 pandemic) as tactical figures that cannot be translated into strategies: "Chaos pilots" and "Kairos poets," those who are able not only to deal with confusion but also to organize it without primarily administering it, and those who can catch the right moment (in the cinema, on the networks, on stage, in the gallery, in the lecture hall, in the museum) and charge it with energy. Without an attitude towards complexity and without an attitude towards time—both are inseparably linked—advanced thinking and advanced aesthetic practice are no longer conceivable.

Just as we need artists and designers who are able to intervene in those time structures that undermine our perception in the smallest way (as in high-frequency trading), we need thinkers and poets who can overflow space-time perceptions in the largest way (as in astrophysics). I call this faculty "Paleo Futurism." It would be excellently suited to explore and develop the spaces of the possibility of past and future presences and to generate those surprises in the relationship between media-men and media-machines that are essential for survival.

Under no circumstances should we stop "projecting alternative worlds" and to work on the realization of "boundless hospitality"—as an essential part of a protected institution that is "unconditional" in the Derrida sense—in our case, in the sense of an unconditional dialogue in the *we* as a museum space of possibility. It is quite possible that in the future museums will become guest-houses for those who cannot find accommodation elsewhere or cannot find hostelry.

Time and Space

In a civilization that, alongside energy, considers time to be the most important raw material for its economy, services, technologies, and arts, we have less to worry about how much or how little "time" we have. (We cannot possess time anyway, because we belong

to it. Time uses us as a display to show how it passes.) Rather, we must be concerned about who owns our time and the time of others and how this micro-politics of power is exercised. There are only two effective remedies for the deep melancholy associated with the endless circling on the rings of Saturn as a basic attitude towards the world: the (re)appropriation of the sovereign availability of time that individual life needs and that art needs; or its excessive waste. Only in this way is the future conceivable—as a permanent thing of impossibility.

The playwriter Heiner Müller, who was also the last president of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin, formulated the requirement for museum spaces arising from modern time pathologies early on, 25 years ago (1995): "At the moment, the bad thing is that there is only time or speed or the course of time, but no more space. We must now create and occupy spaces against this acceleration."[11]

One, perhaps the special quality of art created through technical media is that it is an "art in time"—at all levels of the work, or better, of the work process: the production and processing of the material, its distribution as well as the perception by the viewer or participant. This was Paik's outstanding insight in the dazzling scenes of Fluxus and its subsequent contemporary poetic expenditures: Moving images and sounds exist only in time. In the media technology artifact, electronics is materialized time. "There is no rewind button on the Betamax of your life," Paik remarked mischievously again and again, and at the same time hit the core of our modern time pathologies between depression and paranoia. We can hardly manipulate our biological lifetime. But in successful cases of time-based art, the most beautiful thing that can happen to you as a producer and viewer of art becomes an aesthetic sensation. Something is added to our everyday experience of time that enriches it. We do not only spend the time it takes to perceive and use the work. We feel lucky to have gained time, time of enjoyment, which is given to us by those who have put part of their precious lifetime into the work. From *Zen for Film* (1965) and *TV Buddha* to the many single-channel video works he has written as audio-visual essays, Paik's work can be perceived as a committed, aesthetic objectivisation of 20th century philosophy of time. No museum of the future should fall behind this.

11
Quoted here after an excellent publication of the temporary Berlin Museum *Werkbund-Archiv*, which made intelligent exhibitions especially in the 1980s and 1990s: Eckhard Siepmann, *Räume gegen die Beschleunigung – Zu einer Poetik des Museums* (Berlin, 1995).