Self-Destruct Mode Initiated: Retro-fitting the museum to save it from itself

by Christiana Myers

Their logo is a fractured Doric column, perfectly aestheticized for Instagram, layered over the black-and-red shadow of a monolith—with, at its base, a rose resting as if in memoriam. Beneath this are the words "Death to Museums." As a museum educator and freelance curator, upon seeing this, I felt at once threatened, mournful, and celebratory.

Death to Museums was an "unconference" organized by graduates of the Museum and Exhibition Studies program at the University of Illinois at Chicago in September 2020 following the global COVID-19 lockdowns and the subsequent closures of many cultural institutions. The programming was unapologetic and direct, not your typical institutional conference. Was this a good-riddance eulogy? The title of the opening presentation by Dr. Porshia A. Moore, "Today Is a Good Day for Museums to Die" implied it might be. However, the following day's events included sessions called "Between Apathy and Action: The Educator and the Museum Mission" and "Museum Internships Past, Present, and Future: Dismantling Systems of Power from the Ground Up." And the conference tagline read "The museum is dead. Long live the museum."[1] Clearly the goal here was not the abolition of the institution but its reinvention—if the act of reinvention could somehow avoid the perpetuation of the European museum structure's colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, and violence. The museum must not be reborn in the same shape it was, renewed as a shinier version of itself, or revived only to create further harm. So not reinvention then, but something with a "de" prefix—decentralization, decolonization, democratization.[2] There is as much to do as there is to undo.

Past periods of mass vulnerability and their resulting unrest have initiated social, economic, cultural, and religious overhauls which have, in turn, spurred some of art history's most marked shifts. After the Black Plague,

the Renaissance gave rise to the middle-class, improving social conditions for under-privileged citizens in Europe and fostering the role of artisans.[3] Now, concurrent epidemiological crises of health and injustice prompt discussions of paradigm shifts across disciplines, as workflows become increasingly flexible and digital interactions encourage a more global mode of operating. Historically, cultural institutions like universities, museums, and art galleries, have—with varying degrees of success—designated themselves as incubators of these shifts and society's microcosmic mirrors. If these organizations aspire to embody this position beyond metaphor however then they, too, are in crisis.

The fallacy of many modern museums in colonized lands like Canada[4] is that they claim to be new-world entities while continuing to refract the European ideologies from which they are descended. Fixed within epistemological hierarchies that prioritize whiteness and affluence, these Euro-American institutions perpetuate patriarchal, colonial, and exclusionary academic ideals that, in the years since their inception, have been inveterated as standard practice and guarded by complacency and complicity. Now, the feigned neutrality and progressiveness of these organizations has reached a moment of reckoning—neatly characterized by the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) efforts to re-define the societal role of the museum from "institutions...for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment" to "democratising, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue."[5] This proposed edit attempts to set out what museums could—or should—be, rather than merely observe what they are already. While this is reasonable, even admirable, given the power held within the field by those steering the definition, it also implies that those who resist its evolution under the guise of its ostensibly fashionable contemporary resonance do so with the same violent arrogance that established these institutions as palaces of absolute knowledge and value.[6]

Individuals in power attempting to cement the museological structure will be inescapably rocked by COVID-19 induced instability. Lockdowns, protests, and demands for accountability and transparency have already shaken institutional foundations. Fault lines have given way and long-held tensions

have been released, manifesting as asymmetrical lay-offs[7] and the exposure of human rights violations and curatorial misconduct.[8] In direct response to the 2020 wave of Black Lives Matter protests, a genre of public statement emerged that could, at best, be described as a beacon of institutional accountability and at worst, a parade of bureaucratic virtue signaling.[9] While it would be preferable to believe that these "we can do better" statements were penned by museum directors and senior management, it is likely that they were delegated to, or orchestrated by, mid to lower level staff, who not only build and maintain face to face relationships with the public, but are also statistically more likely to belong to the marginalized communities to which the statements refer. Even as the homogenous legacy that distances these individuals from the institution's strategic decision-making pervades, these individuals often manage to remain the most radical within it—for as long as they are willing and able to retain a position. The social upheavals of the 1960s shifted the role and function of museum education away from institutional spokesmanship and into a more subversive and experimental language. I believe that we are now encountering a similar pedagogical turn wherein educators and other front of house staff, while professionally interpreting the exhibitions and collections on display, are becoming open to strategizing methods in order to surreptitiously interpret curatorial rationale. Like its predecessor, this movement has, in most instances, not radicalized the organization itself, but has served to bridge the chasm between curatorial practice and public engagement.[10]

This type of role, with its ability to utilize institutional positionality in order to better serve the public and, in a nebulous sense, effect social change is defined in la paperson's book, "A Third University is Possible", as the scyborg. A scyborg is a "reorganizer of institutional machinery"—or systems (hence, the s)—who "subvert that machinery against the master-code of its makers."[11] In other words, scyborgs leverage their influence and relative privilege within oppressive or limiting frameworks, using the apparatus of the institutions they operate within to shift, hack, or rewire its operations without dismantling the structure as a whole. In thinking about museums and art galleries, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that

they are not naturally occurring entities but rather engineered circuit boards of policies and practices. Scyborgs have the capacity to be bugs in this system, disrupting the pathways that lead to the sanitization of violent or colonial histories, and by holding curatorial staff and management accountable to their communities. Public institutions will not be kept alive by senior staff who have only their power to lose, nor by the alienated audiences whose interest went unfostered, but they have a chance to be rectified by scyborgs—those machine enough to understand the circuitry and human enough to see its failings. Scyborgs, while critical in the way that they reject inherited narratives, are first and foremost agents of repair as their ideologies focus on what they have the capacity to suggest or offer. Critique is valuable, but happens at a distance, while repair is messy and ongoing.[12] As such, scyborgs must be prepared to fall short, make errors, and continue building even if their new machines break down. Humility is vital to avoid the oligarchical institutional practices of the past. As la paperson states, "only the bad guys build things that last forever."[13]

In thinking about decentralization, decolonization, and democratization we must acknowledge that these are not places to go but actions to take. The flawed logic of institutions since their inception has been the accretion of their authority as purveyors of incontestable truth. They must be willing to admit the inherent limitations of claiming sole authority over culture. The definition of the role of museums should not be monumentalized, but should, like its collections and administrators, be under constant scrutiny. During this time of vulnerability, slowing down, and questioning the status quo, cultural institutions are faced with an opportunity to prove whether they operate for and on behalf of their publics or whether the care they purport to give—a fixture in the 'curare' spiel of curatorial staff—has been purely performative.

In their mission-statement text, questioning the potential for museums to make these changes, Death to Museums refers to a quote by Tunde Wey, a New Orleans-based activist and artist that asks "Can you renovate a burning house?" In response, I would posit that museums are not on fire, yet. The warning signs—sparking conduits, broken circuits, and a mess of

wiring left behind by negligence, entitlement, and incompetence that might be missed by the average visitor are alarming foreshadowing for those who spend time within museum walls. It is the scyborgs who have a creative predisposition for repair, to detangle the wires and solder the appropriate connections. Like a monument, such as those torn down amid recent protests, the destruction or removal of museums will not erase the misdoings of their individual or collective past. However, by empowering a system of discerning individuals, the organizational structure can be stripped back and its frameworks used to support new construction. The external shape will undoubtedly be similar, as change moves slowly, but with the administration of much needed renovations, the live wires that spark continued violence and exploitation may be gutted in time to mitigate an otherwise imminent institutional inferno.

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References

1 "Death to Museums," Death to Museums, accessed October 5, 2020, https://deathtomuseums.com/.

2 Decentralize, decolonize, and democratize are all loaded words in their own right and are not exempt from having been co-opted as buzzwords for institutional copy. For the purposes of this text, they are being referred to as working processes rather than achieved states of being.

3 Lawrence Wright, "How Pandemics Wreak Havoc and Open Minds," *The New Yorker*, July 13, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/how-pandemics-wreak-havoc-and-open-minds.

4 In this instance "Canada" refers to the colonial designation of a geographic area and the governing structures within it.

5 "Museum Definition," International Council of Museums, accessed October 5, 2020, https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/.

6 Sarah Procter, The Whole Picture: *The colonial story of the art in our museums and why we need to talk about it* (United Kingdom: Cassell, 2020), Part I.

7 Ben Quinn, "Tate faces protests over impact of job cuts on BAME staff," The Guardian, July 26, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/26/tate-faces-protests-over-job-cuts-impact-on-bame-staff.

8 Josh Crabbe, "'Complete hypocrisy': Human rights museum employees say they experienced racism at work," CTV News, June 11, 2020, https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/complete-hypocrisy-human-rights-museum-employees-say-they-experienced-racism-at-work-1.4980875.

9 Moe Kirkpatrick, "What do our museums' BLM statements mean for an anti-racist future?," The Ubyssey, July 2, 2020, https://www.ubyssey.ca/culture/anti-racism-in-vancouver-museums/.

10 Michelle Millar Fisher, "Museum Education and the Pedagogic Turn", *ArtWrit*, Summer 2011, http://www.artwrit.com/article/museum-education-and-the-pedagogic-turn/.

11 la paperson, *A Third University is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

12 "critique or repair? a call to know your post", sarah hendren, June 30, 2020, https://sarahendren.com/2020/06/30/critique-or-repair-a-call-to-know-your-post/.

13 la paperson, A Third University is Possible.