**Polyvalent Spaces: The Postmodern Wunderkammer and the Return of Ambiguity**

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When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.

Baudrillard, *Simulations*

Sometime in 1987, on a modest block of Venice Boulevard in downtown Culver City, of West Los Angeles, the Museum of Jurassic Technology quietly opened its doors to the public. The project was the creation of an unassuming man named David Wilson, offering viewers an immersive, exquisitely installed Victorian-era museum environment full of dimly-lit dioramas and exhibitions. The theatrical displays offer a wide variety of natural and historical oddities that narrate what Wilson defines as “the Lower Jurassic”, ranging from horned ants and Flemish moths to microscopic sculptures made out of human hair and representations of old-time remedies. The MJT recurs to obscure chapters of human knowledge to offer a Borgesian universe of poetic and cosmic connections, guiding us, as the museum itself claims, “as a chain of flowers into the mysteries of life.” The museum’s perplexing exhibits, with their elaborate narratives, beautiful presentation, and, to many, suspicious veracity, have generated an enthusiastic cult-like following amongst contemporary artists, taking a unique spot as an “artist’s Wunderkammer”.

A second example of a contemporary Wunderkammern, although this one on the East Coast and taking art history as its subject, is located on a rear building near the corner of Spring and Mulberry Streets in New York’s SoHo. Opened to the public in 1992 and still in operation, The Salon de Fleurus doesn’t have a web page nor does it advertise itself through any means. Instead, it has existed mainly by word of mouth for two decades in Manhattan, and its hidden feel is vital to its own anachronistic condition (as it references a historical period far before the digital age). The Salon is open only in the evening hours (I was told this was done in order to give a certain quality to the experience). I will not describe the interior in detail, so as to not disrupt a potential visiting experience of the reader, but suffice to say that the name relates to Gertrude Stein’s apartment at 27, Rue de Fleurus, where she held what was likely the very first collection of modern art. The evocative environment, presented against the background of an Édith Piaf album, oscillates between the domestic and the public space, or between an antiques bazaar and a museum. Several paintings hang on the dim lit walls are described as the work of “anonymous authors” but appear to be replicas of works by Cezanne, Braque, and Picasso. Together, they conjure up a defining yet fragile moment in history when these pieces were hanging for the first time in history. Visitors to the Salon (the Salon only admits a very small group of people at a time) are welcomed at the door by the curator, who describes himself only as the “caretaker” of the collection. He conducts the group to the rear end of the building and, once entering the Salon and letting the visitors take it all in, starts with a narration that further enhances the space as a perfect hybrid of a historical house and a mythical place—namely, the birthplace of modernism.

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Because neither the curators of the MJT or the Salon de Fleurus claim their spaces as art project nor describe themselves as artists, this doesn’t seem to be an accurate label to give to either of them; yet the pedagogic license taken over the interpretation of the objects, the opaque mission statement of their enterprises and the unusual conditions of the exhibitions also would prevent one to place them in the roster of Los Angeles or New York cultural institutions. Wilson’s decidedly ambiguous positioning of his museum has made it, for the most part, impossible to extract from its original environment and inserted into a traditional art historical narrative. A case in point would be a casual conversation I had on the subject in 1999 with MoMA’s curator Kynaston McShine, who had just opened his exhibition *The Museum As Muse*—MoMA’s attempt to document and chronicle both the institutional critique generation and the Postmodern impulse by artists to use museum’s as their subject. When I inquired about the conspicuous absence of The MJT in MoMA’s exhibition, McShine shrugged: “I just didn’t know how to fit the Jurassic into the show”. A similar problem arose when curator Larry Rinder selected the Salon de Fleurus to be part of the 2002 Whitney Biennial. While some objects of the Salon were placed in the galleries, they felt out of place inside an art museum. The effect of being inside the Salon was impossible to recreate and the true experience was left for only a few scheduled visitors to the actual location during the biennial.

McShine and Rinder are not the only ones who have had trouble pinning down these Postmodern Wunderkammern—like the MJT’s conceptually elusive Flemish moths—into art history. The constant conundrum of how to place these projects in a curatorial context—what is true or not about the exhibits, on whether this should be regarded as an art work or not, on whether the institution should be treated like any other museum, and so forth— is also the main reason of their success, and may simply just point to the fact that they may actually be all these things at once. It was the late Marcia Tucker who first gave the most accurate assessment of the MJT: “It’s like a museum, a critique of museums and a celebration of museums,—all rolled into one.”[[1]](#endnote--1)1

Much has been written about the MJT in terms of its history, its exhibitions, and its connection to the traditional cabinet of curiosities—most notably by Lawrence Weschler in his 1995 book *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*—so I will not repeat Weschler’s insightful description and analysis. What I will focus on in this short text is in offering some thoughts on where these contemporary Wunderkammers like the MJT and the Salon de Fleurus could be placed in the larger historical context of contemporary art practice, tracing a brief typology of these projects and their spatial and narrative strategies, and argue how its manipulation of spatial, cognitive and narrative conventions proposes models that in fact are now helping redefine the notion of the alternative space employing, in an unorthodox way, community building notions that are comparable to Ray Oldenburg’s theory of the “third place.” I will argue that their slipperiness, achieved through a delicate choreography of physical and conceptual space, has become one of the most important contributions to rethinking today’s artist enterprises, merging earnestness with irony, certainty with self-doubt.

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One of the great gifts that Postmodernism brought in the visual arts was, via Minimalism, the appropriation of historical models through the filters of irony and self-awareness. This attribute is common of artist’s insertions into institutional frameworks roughly ranging from the 1970s to the early 90s (such as Michael Asher, Fred Wilson, Hans Haacke, Barbara Bloom, Andrea Fraser, and many others) that became associated with institutional critique. These groups of artists used the theatrical and pedagogical conventions of museums as a medium to build a phenomenology of the viewer and increase awareness, self-reflexivity, and critical thought on issues such as the authoritative voice of the museum, the subjective narratives of art history, and the alignment of cultural institutions with economic and political power. The more ancillary practice by artists to concoct museums as critical and autonomous mechanisms could be traced back to the inauguration in 1968 of Marcel Broodthaers’ *Musée d'Art Moderne, Départment des Aigles.* By creating conceptual and nomadic museum without a permanent collection, Broodthaers’ project displayed the self-consciousness, irony, confrontation, and mutability that became the basis of institutional critique. Broodthaers’ fictional museum model, as well as the later works by artists who took on the institutional disguise, were more than an atavistic simulation: it was a reappropriation of the experiential ritual of art, a criticism of the purported knowledge onto which modernism laid its foundation, and an attempt to blur the boundaries of art and life and historical and fictional narratives.

These type of hybrid “museums” adopt a museological narrative model that from the onset counters the rational linearity of Modernism and a rebellion to the tenets of its pristine ideals of neutral space. In terms of space, it is natural that, because the canonical modernist narrative in the visual arts had been staged using the white cube, that its counterpoint should be constructed using an opposite device. In the case of the Salon, there is an attempt to re-enact the pre-modern environment that led to the construction of the white cube: the domestic space where artists socialized, exchanged ideas, and lived their lives. Similarly, the MJT appropriates elements of the entire history of museums, ranging from the XVIIth century cabinets of curiosities to the XIXth century natural history museum, as if searching for a new historical referent that would altogether bypass the avant-garde.

In terms of narrative linearity, the MJT’s exhibits don’t deal with art necessarily, but rather with curiosities of science and history, returning, as it were, art to an encyclopedic mission, a primal habitat where it once shared space with scientific and religious items, as well as with objects of superstition and of wonder, liberating it from the modernist demand of speaking about itself. The Salon de Fleurus, by presenting replicas of famous paintings that are claimed as anonymous, proposes a questioning of authorship that is not only pre-modern, but pre-art historical, returning to the time when art in churches had no authors.

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Different and unique as they both are, both the Museum of Jurassic Technology and the Salon de Fleurus employ a strategy of contextual displacement and immersion, where the viewer has to ask oneself where he or she is. This slight confusion is key to introduce the viewer into a situation where objects and the place itself, although are being assigned specific names (*this* is a museum, *that* is an exhibit, *this* is an artwork, *you* are a museum visitor, etc.) they soon start looking like something else and shedding their officially assigned meaning (in the same way in which the MJT’ s scientific exhibitions don’t appear to be objective, the Salon doesn’t feel like an anonymous location, but rather a very accurate historical reconstruction of a very concrete place and the events around it). What is regained by this strategy of displacement, interestingly, is a more heightened awareness of the visual information being presented to us.

Connected to the feeling of displacement is the playful tension that both spaces employ with the notions of authenticity and truth as conveyed by an institution. While using formal devices and authoritative interpretive tools such as the ones used by museums, but also presenting statements that are at best dubious or arguable, one is left to *wonder*, perennially left with more questions about the answers that are being given. The more one scratches for the “truth” of these places, the more one sinks into ambiguity.

Another, equally important component of these two spaces, is their intimacy. Both the MJT and the Salon are relatively small locations, so the social dynamics that take place in there are closer to the one that would take place in a small or medium size shop than in a public art museum. Size allows also for a more personal relationship with the art, and perhaps for an unexpected kind of isolation where we are not surrounded by others to influence our thoughts on what we are experiencing— instead we are there to reflect on our own and to have one-to-one dialogues. Additionally, spaces like these become conversation pieces amongst the initiated, offering a mystery that can be discussed and debated. Amongst those close to the spaces, the humor of deceit also becomes important.

It goes without saying that all the above described conditions are very difficult, if not impossible, to recreate in public art museums today. A museum’s public mission and duties toward access, interpretation, and their sheer mandate to accommodate large groups of people to every exhibition greatly reduce the possibility to preserve the one-to-one experience of art. In reality, this is the great irony about museums, which in theory should offer viewing situations where the art works come to life in the mind of the viewer. Yet, because the public demands access and information in all sorts of formats, much of the art experience needs to be mediated through a series of frames, labels, and explanations that can quickly turn each artwork into a dead specimen. Contemporary Wunderkammern, by contrast, can afford to dispense with any demands of public service and create a world were a seemingly opaque and surreal logic erases every sort of frame, or rather, the frames that it presents appear to fuse into the work itself (the mission statement of the MJT, for instance, instead of explaining anything, only becomes an extension of the opacity of the interior space).

Jean Baudrillard’s quote at the beginning of this essay refers to how the inevitable effect of a perfect simulation is the nostalgia of the real. There is indeed a pervasive sense of longing on these places, a romantic impulse to restore a kind of knowledge that had been lost (or, quoting one of the exhibition titles of the MJT, “no one will ever have the same knowledge again”). In the postmodern context, this nostalgic sensibility should not be interpreted just as a Pre-Raphaelite-like movement toward recapturing some kind of lost innocence or building an artistic Arcadia, but instead as another kind of impulse as described before: the restoration of the viewing experience, and the attainment of secret knowledge, as in an alchemical process that bestows the visitor with a prized possession through mysterious means.

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Both the MJT and Salon de Fleurus emerged during a period where the global expansion of the art world in post-wall Europe led to a oversize biennial landscape, where major museums focused on blockbuster exhibitions that would attract the larger public, and where incremental rise of the art market, and the decline of public funding for the arts in the United States led to the closing of many alternative spaces and displaced many artists communities in search for spaces to present their work. At the same time, in the late 80s and early 90s, urban changes in American cities led sociologists to propose new models for neighborhood design and about local solutions to community building. In 1989, sociologist Ray Oldenburg famously proposed the notion of the “third place”, that location between work and home where individuals find an environment that is structured just so that they can feel at ease but also stimulated enough so that they can engage in activities that reinforce their sense of selves and their sense of belonging (the notion was taken, and successfully implemented, by the corporate chain Starbucks which expanded exponentially in the 90s selling the idea of a location that was just between work and home).

The Oldenburgian third place is grounded on the notion of a participatory public, where the primacy is personal interaction, and where participants can feel most at ease. In perhaps a counter-intuitive way, spaces like the MJT and the Salon de Fleurus proposed a version of the third place for the art community: a place for the initiated, where experience of the work takes primacy, but simultaneously serves as a social glue. By making it difficult to access, the membership becomes more enthusiastic. Furthermore, I would posit that these third spaces in the visual arts go beyond the normal duality of work and home: they propose a space between truth and fiction; between the museum and the artist studio, and between public and private, and between knowing and unknowing. While theoretically grounded in postmodernism, they point to a step beyond traditional oppositionalities where we by necessity need to adopt simultaneous roles as architects and inhabitants, or as curators/narrators and actors. The viewer, in this case, becomes a complicit participant in furthering the dialogue of fiction (that is, by playing along as a regular museum visitor).

Looking at the new generation of artists and artist spaces in Los Angeles, one could argue that at least in the case of the MJT, its example has been followed by a number of new experiments, if not on museum-building, certainly on the ambiguous spaces. The Center for Land Use Interpretation, founded in 1994, describes itself as an “education and research organization” but it participates directly in the art world through site-specific projects and activities. Machine Project, a space run by artist Mark Allen, while it doesn’t operate like a museum has adopted a hybrid model of community center, Kunsthalle, and school. Artist Fritz Haeg turned his house in Los Angeles into a school organizing a variety of activities that ranged from basic learning experiences to performance. Many more spaces emerge on a nearly daily basis. New York has also seen a remarkable proliferation of such hybrid spaces (although due perhaps to the much more higher rents in the city, they tend to live much briefer lives).

What is clear from the experiment of the Postmodern Wunderkammern is that, drawing from the tools of Institutional Critique, they emerged as autonomous spaces that refused definition as a key part of their identity, small in scale in order to retain individual relationships and experiences, and reached out to a type of knowledge that may be obscure, universal, erudite, or simply strange, to produce moments of wonder and communal experience, always by participating in a simulated representation. Their nostalgic aura is yet another of their disguises: they are as much about the present as they are about the past. They point to a need to abandon permanent structures and move, as we already do in so many phases of our contemporary life, into movable platforms of experience.

1. 1 Quoted by Lawrence Weschler, in “Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder”, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)