

## POSTMODERNISM'S MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

Rosalind E. Krauss

André Malraux's *musée imaginaire* moved westward into English translation to become the "museum without walls". Bowing to the English language's appetite for demonstration, for the concrete instance, for the visualizable example—for the image, in short—the translator made free with the book's title and therefore with its conceptual underpinnings as well. In French, Malraux's master conceit addresses the purely conceptual space of the human faculties: imagination, cognition, judgment; englished, it speaks instead to a place rendered physical, a space we might walk through, even though a museum without walls, being something of a paradox, will be traversed with difficulty.

This Anglo-Saxon desire for language to construct a stage on which things—even ideas—will happen is more or less foreign to Malraux's own way of proceeding. His discussion of museums does not address matters of architecture and in fact his book contains only two images of actual galleries: the first a seventeenth-century picture gallery as painted by Teniers; the second a photograph of a room in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. It is true, of course, that each of these illustrations pictures different kinds of spaces within which art was installed prior to the advent of the *musée imaginaire*, but it is also the case that for Malraux each is intended to function more as the paradigm of a way that art had historically been conceived, or valued, or systematized, a specific way, in short, in which it was previously imagined.

The first, preceding the organization of the museum as it was instituted in the nineteenth century, establishes nonetheless those standards of taste on which the official museums would eventually be founded, a taste, Malraux argues, which came ironically to be undermined and superseded by the very processes of order and method that the new institutions imposed. Teniers's work, *The Gallery of the Archduke Leopold at Brussels*, sets the parameters of this European taste along two axes: medium and aesthetic norm. Oil painting is the privileged technique of expression; Italianate Classicism is the normative condition of representation. And these things, prized and collected from the Renaissance onward, will be the very objects that will be given pride of place in the nineteenth-century museum.

The photograph of a room in the Washington National Gallery, his second emblematic example, can make visible very little of what Malraux wants to say about what the nineteenth-century museum actually did to the Classical values it had inherited. All we can see is the new imposition of order that, in comparison, looks almost fanatical in kind. Instead of several dozen pictures all clamoring for the Archduke's attention, we now see only three: three El Grecos hang in that space, generous amounts of wall separating each from its neighbor, a velvet guard-rope dividing the realm of the painting from that of the spectator, the corner of a skylight just visible above, providing a uniform illumination over all the room's contents. Thus what we experience is not so much architectural as museological. For it is the presence of those El Grecos in a place of honor that opens onto what Malraux wants to say about the newly wrought museum; for El Greco, along with artists like Georges de la Tour and Piero della Francesca, entered the space of the collection due to the reorganization of value that the museum itself had begun to effect.

Malraux's point about the museum-as-institution is that it became a great field of comparison, but not in the old way, with Classicism at the center and everything else seen as marginal to it: barbaric or demotic deviations from a norm. Rather, the museum's comparisons began to operate within a space neutralized by efforts to range and to classify: all objects of type A in one place, those of type B in another. This collectivization—the work of the museum and its eventual partner, the art historian—began to create unities with what could be seen as their own internal coherence. These were then understood not as fallings away from a master center, but as inventions of so many epicenters, so many variants within the field of meaning. Meaning, indeed, became a function of the comparisons set up between type A with *its* center, and type B with its own. And this establishment of meaning as a function of comparison—Classical v. Baroque; south v. north; line v. colour—organized the understanding of art within the model of language: oppositive, negative, relative. Each artistic form had something to say and its own language/dialect/idiom with which to say it. Within art-historical practice, these linguistic branches then became what is known as *style*.

With meaning now the master model—having supplanted beauty (Classicism as normative)—all the arts, high and low, east and west, court and folk, begin to find a place in the museum. It is their presence in turn, Malraux goes on to argue, that would hasten the rupture with the entire past of the Western tradition and would usher into being, by mid-twentieth century, the *musée imaginaire*.

Architecture is not discussed in any of this, but the building chosen to stand for the institutionalized museum is itself representative of a particular building type familiar to all of us who have visited the world's great museums. Whether it is a venerable example like the Louvre or the Uffizi, or a modern version like the Metropolitan or Washington National Gallery, this type derives from the Renaissance palace, with its series of rooms *en filade*. Each of these rooms, Classical in proportion, serves as a space in which to center its given contents, enacting through the means of architectural design the notion of the specificity of the room's collection of artifacts, their gathering round the epicenter of their own style. But the genius of the design *en filade* is that each room is also insistently tied to the one before and the one after, organized through an obvious and apparent sequentiality. One proceeds in such a building from space to space along a processional path that ties each of these spaces together, a sort of narrative trajectory with each room the place of a separate chapter, but all of them articulating the unfolding of the master plot. The building type originally conceived for the enactment of the rituals of royalty or of state came to sustain, then, through a transmutation of function, the staging of another kind of drama: the unfolding, through the spectator's motion from room to room along the straight course of the architecture, of that temporal span we have come to know as the history of art.

Although the twentieth century saw many constructions of shiny, marble art palaces, with their rooms succeeding one another *en filade*, two new models had been elaborated by the time of Malraux's book, models which had far more in common with the rewriting of the terms of the museum within the era of modernism, with, that is, the forces that were shaping Malraux's *musée imaginaire*. These models were based, on the one hand, on the "universal space" of Mies van der Rohe, and on the other, on the spiral ramps of Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

The universal space is what Mies finally managed to build, in reduced and truncated form, in Berlin and Houston, and what served as the model for the original exhibition spaces at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. A massive, neutral enclosure, the space is a function of its structure—the universal space frame—which is to say a modular roof construction (a three-way truss) that, due to its extreme lightness can be supported by minimal vertical elements, and due to its aggregate nature is expandable in any direction and can thus grow to "infinite" dimensions. No internal walls are needed to support this structure and so free-standing partitions can be positioned and repositioned at will. The spatial "idea" of the plan is its combination of neutrality and immensity. Being a grid of vast proportions, it is a kind of constructed mathesis, a value-free

network within which to set individual objects in (changing) relation. Being an immense enclosure which nonetheless defines a space, thereby establishing a sense of unity throughout the whole, it constructs the very experience of the all encompassing idea that collectivizes the variety and diversity of production it contains: the idea that Malraux will see as transcending that of style, the idea of a collective language called Art.

For Malraux's notion of the *musée imaginaire* is, in fact, another way of writing "modernism," that is, of transcoding the aesthetic notions upon which modern art was built: the idea of art as autonomous and autotelic, the sense of it as self-valuable, the view of it that had been summarized as *l'art pour l'art*. This, Malraux argues, was the ultimate effect of collectivizing all those paintings within the nineteenth century's institutional invention—the museum. This was the release of a language that spoke not just the difference of stylistic meanings, but also the trans-stylistic expressivity of form itself. "The proper sphere of oil painting," he writes, "was becoming that which, beyond all theories and even the noblest dreams had brought together the pictures in the museums; it was not, as had been thought until now, a question of technique and a series of discoveries, but a language independent of the thing portrayed—as specific, *sui generis*, as music."<sup>1</sup>

The *musée imaginaire* is, then, the exercise on the part of the receiver of the prerogatives of this language. It is the possibility of experiencing the autonomous power of form that two waves of the decontextualization of art objects have wrought. In the first wave works of art are ripped away from their sites of origin and, through their transplantation to the museum, cut loose from all referentiality to the use, representational or ritual, for which they might have been created. In the second wave they are, through their transplantation to the site of reproduction (through art books, postcards, posters), unmoored from their original scale, every work whether tiny or colossal now to be magically equalized through the democratizing effects of camera and press. Malraux is eloquent about this second effect:

It is hard for us clearly to realize the gulf between the performance of an Aeschylean tragedy, with the instant Persian threat and Salamis looming across the Bay, and the effect we get from reading it; yet, dimly albeit, we feel the difference. All that remains of Aeschylus is his genius. It is the same with figures that in reproduction lose both their original significance as objects and their function (religious or other); we see them only as works of art and they bring home to us only their makers' talent. We might almost call them not "works" but "moments" of art. Yet diverse as they are, all these objects... speak for the same endeavor; it is as though an unseen presence, the spirit of art, were urging all on the same quest, from miniature to picture, from fresco to stained-glass window, and then, at certain moments, it abruptly indicated a new line of advance, parallel or abruptly divergent. Thus it is that, thanks to the rather specious unity imposed by photographic reproduction on a multiplicity of objects, ranging from the statue to the bas-relief, from bas-reliefs to seal-impressions, and from these to the plaques of the nomads, a "Babylonian style" seems to emerge as a real entity, not a mere classification—as something resembling, rather, the life-story of a great creator. Nothing conveys more vividly and compellingly the notion of a destiny shaping human ends than do the great styles, whose evolutions and transformations seem like long scars on that Fate has left, in passing, on the face of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

These great "fictions" that the *musée imaginaire* makes visible are, then, so many stories about the collective spirit of human creativity, so many versions of the inventiveness evidenced by the Family of Man, like multiple documents of Man's Fate. And further, what the *musée imaginaire* makes possible is that the user of the museum may participate in this writing, may create his or her own "fiction"—a new account that will reveal yet another transsection through the body of "Fate."

It is this dimension of the *musée imaginaire*—its endless imaginative productions—that the spiral ramp renders as built form. Initially, of course, it might seem that the ramp merely extends and hypostatizes that fact of trajectory that had been one of the major features of the arrangement *en filade*, with its emphasis on continuity and sequence, of the nineteenth-century palace/museum. Indeed, as the pull of gravity encourages one's descent down the circling ramp of Wright's Guggenheim Museum, sequence is at the very core of the experience. But this isolation of the trajectory in which the viewer's body will engage and about which he or she cannot help but be conscious since its unfolding from beginning to end is made visible as the eye surveys the sweep of the spiral around the open atrium at the building's center, this expression of the trajectory *as such* is another modernist transcoding of art as a function of the *musée imaginaire*. For this ramp is understood, within the work of, say, Le Corbusier, as the physical expression of intentionality, of the viewer's prospective desire to master the space before him or her, of a cognitive effort that precedes motion. As such it is the site for that act of imaginative projection, through which the receiver of art makes of it a fiction, *the perceiver's own* fiction, a new writing, that is, of Art's universal story.

In more than three decades that have passed since Malraux conceived the *musée imaginaire* as an open field into which the viewer's own imaginative, projective, play was welcomed, making the space of modernism itself the ground of a universalization of the power of the artist and of the creative act, things have changed. A certain critical discourse names the advent of this change "postmodernism."

A key to this shift might be found in the terms through which Malraux projects Picasso as the most representative figure in all of the *musée imaginaire*, and the way we would now, in 1986, read that description. In 1952 Malraux spoke of Picasso's own collection of art objects as the mini-museum of his studio from which, "day after day he looses on the world those strange works in which the conflict between the artist and life's forms moves to a climax," a museum, he added, whose "show-cases look like a miniature museum of 'barbarian' art. This multifariousness of forms in modern individualist art has made it easier for us to accept the infinite variety of the past, each style of which as it emerges, suggests to us an individual artist, at long last resuscitated."<sup>3</sup>

Now, our reading of that remark takes place against the background of the cultural implosion which marks today's aesthetic practice, in which high art and mass culture are busy imitating each other, in which bits and shards of the entire history of art as well as the entire field of advertising and kitsch production get collaged into a single picture, and in which the reigning style is that of pastiche. What Malraux had seen as Picasso's extraordinary appetite, his creative rage to incorporate everything, we see as his once-more prophetic relationship to the characteristics of that part of his age that is now becoming ours: its disorientation within the labyrinth of the museum, its promiscuous attraction to any and all styles, its yielding to the glamour of the object as photographed, advertised, reproduced. We look, horrified, at the spectacle of Picasso's eclecticism, at his appearance as the master pasticheur.

This difference between Malraux's view of the matter and our own might be prefigured in that famous and important disagreement between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno about how to interpret the figure of the ragpicker for nineteenth-century Parisian culture. Having read Benjamin's study of Baudelaire in which the ragpicker is made into a symbol of the artist—in his dimension as a marginalized figure, a social outcast—Adorno strenuously objects.<sup>4</sup> This romanticization of both artist and ragpicker—with each the symbol of the other—comes, Adorno insists, from a failure to decode these figures theoretically. Had Benjamin done so, he continues, the capitalist function of the ragpicker would have to have been articulated: "namely, to subject even rubbish to exchange value."<sup>5</sup>

The recycling of the past which is the function of the ragpicker has become that, as well, of the artist—pasticheur. That has been the fate of the *musée imaginaire* in our time. Malraux's beautiful art book with its wonderful color plates and its elegantly photographed fragments, yielding their delicious "fictions," has

become the vastly expanded art library into which the contemporary artist goes on his raids. And the *musée imaginaire*, turned into a field of serendipitous exploration, has not only become a vast used-book store, but perhaps even more accurate to the nature of the exchange that takes place, a flea-market.

During the time that contemporary production in painting and sculpture has taken on this almost universal relation to pastiche, an extraordinary outpouring of new museum buildings has occurred. And it can be argued that among them are the beginnings of a new architectural type that is responsive to this reconfiguration of the museum without walls.

I have in mind Hans Hollein's Municipal Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach and Richard Meier's Museum of Decorative Arts at Frankfurt, two buildings that in terms of basic parts would seem to have little to do with each other. Meier's is an orderly arrangement of cubic spaces around a square courtyard, the movement from floor to floor organized by processional ramps. Hollein's is an eccentric cluster of regular and irregular spaces arranged along an insistent diagonal, a diagonal plan of movement fetishized in the galleries of the permanent collection as a kind of *en filade en bias*. Vertical circulation in this building occurs via stairways.

But these arrangements of walls convey nothing of that type of experience generated by the two architects, one which can be said to transcend the obstacle of wall or floor. For the reigning idea in both museums is the vista: the sudden opening in the wall of a given gallery to allow a glimpse of a far-away object, and thereby to interject within the collection of *these* objects a reference to the order of another. The pierced partition, the open balcony, the interior window—circulation in these museums is as much visual as physical, and that visual movement is a constant decentering through the continual pull of something else, another exhibit, another relationship, another formal order, inserted within this one in a gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea-market.

The art book was Malraux's model of the *musée imaginaire*, with all its overtones of the modernist elevation of the value of form. It is a different artbook that now serves as our model of the museum without walls, with all of postmodernism's leveling of formal value, its interest in the constant play of exchange, and its practice based on the interchangeability of style and form. Malraux taught us that the museum had been essential to the production of the art book at the time of an elitist, specialist press; we are now experiencing this logic turning back on itself as we watch how the mass-market art book is crucial to the conception of the new museum.

## NOTES

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- 1 André Malraux, *The Voices of Science*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 112.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 4 See Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire, Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1969.
- 5 Adorno's letter to Benjamin is published in *Aesthetic and Politics*, London, New Left Books, 1977, p. 130.