“Big Urban Toys”: Mutant Museums

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- 1 Museums of modern and contemporary art, swaddled as they usually are in marks of public esteem, are not altogether happy with themselves. They are a little apologetic for being what they are—what they are, what they ought to be: they no longer quite know with the same happy conviction. They dream of changes. They strive doggedly to perceive themselves as every manner of anti-museum, and construct themselves as anti-monuments.
- 2 Beaubourg, January 1977: the museum of modern art announced in a great splash of tubes and primary colours that it was changing or, better still, *doing away with itself*, and becoming a multidisciplinary centre. Changing into a "utopian machine with ever adaptable surfaces, shunning all monumentality and all pigeonholing alike", writes Bernadette Dufrêne (p.62). A place where it is decided that creative work will be conceived in terms of production and knowledge as shared information. This utopia involving a radical laicization of the religious values of art, a ceaseless factual outpouring to bring works back into immanence, a headlong confidence granted to the dynamics of social communication, in the diffracted, light, where applicable, of the products of human activity—this is that *La Création de Beaubourg* celebrates, a hymn to that "first Beaubourg" of the period 1977-1981, when Pontus Hulten headed the department of visual arts, alias

the National Museum of Modern Art and, it is said, felt "reluctant to use the term museum" (p.156). In a similar vein, the recent adulteration of this utopia is quite naturally suspect, under the shadow of a return to static patrimonial values, to a stricter hierarchy of museum spaces, and above all to the invasion of these same spaces by the leprosy of consumerism. The latest stage of this adulteration is already there for us to see, with the "franchised" branch opened in 1997 in Bilbao by the New York Guggenheim Museum, under the aegis of Thomas Krens, its insatiable director. Besides, as Gérard Selbach emphasizes in his overview of "the culture industry" which embraces more and more American art museums, Bilbao won't be monopolizing the discussion. The Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Boston Museum of Fine Art have pursued very similar strategies in Japan; other museums—in fact nearly every other museum—are actually striving to cope with a chronic financial crisis that has reigned since the early 1990s, and trying their hand at practices, all attesting a "hybridization of the museum system" by "the entrepreneurial system of the mercantile sector" (p.195); thus, at the dawn of a new "cultural-play" age (p.230), the declaration of the fundamental tasks of the museum, which have remained more or less the same since the 19th century, is less and less legible—even by those very people who are in charge—, while the gap "between the missionary discourse and management operations" widens (p.237). From Beaubourg 1977 to Bilbao 1997, from P. Hulten to T. Krens, has there been a disaster? But more than one thread links these adversarial changes. Thus Willem Sandberg, director of Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum from 1945 to 1962, and P. Hulten's mentor, was already, according to B. Dufrêne, using "all his advertising know-how to draw the public into his Anti-Museum" (p.79). To shore up the idea of breaking down the sacred aura around the aesthetic relationship, he readily developed a comparison between museum and large shop. As for Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, they talked of their Beaubourg project as a "big urban toy" (p.108), or, better still, as a "fun palace" (p.120); they were pleased at having made the festive dynamic of the building itself prevail over its contents; in a nutshell, they shared with T. Krens the idea, quoted by Coosje van Bruggen in the "coffee table" book devoted to Frank O. Gehry's building in Bilbao, "that we are no longer limited by the [museum] concept of the encyclopaedia" (p.19). Like them, what's more, Gehry lends a powerful iconic autonomy to his flower-like, titanium-clad building, while at the same time defining the ideal museum as a "relaxed place" (p.115), a refuge for the viewer washed up in the maze of its larksome curves—but just as much a machine for "wielding power" (p.77) over the urban fabric.

- 3 From the same movement, in a word, nurturing the changes of modern art museums over the past 20 or 30 years, we find a link-up between the desire to demythify and the enhancement of games, to maintain and hone the social impact of the institution. On the other hand, what the public picks up is either affliction, permeated by the nostalgia for a comeback of the age of sanctuaries, or the craze, pure and simple, for a vague creative polymorphism, or panic at the far-reaching corruption of the democratic impulse into spectacular consumption, and political and critical responsabilization into pseudo-festive non-differentiation. To make choices, you still have to know what you're talking about—which is what, precisely, Jean Davallon strives to do, bringing together the works of more than 15 years in *L'Exposition à l'œuvre*, and forming a kind of summum of exhibition socio-semiotics, broached as a text in which we can read the intentional process of exhibiting and the arrangement for taking in this intention, within a "communicational context" (p.17). Among the methodological methods of this kind of questioning, we find the development of the fact that the exhibition is, *per se*, a "ritual of representation", drawing

its "symbolic operativeness" from a mediatory operation with present but nevertheless represented objects (p.143): an arrangement of objects which form a world and show the visitor the absent origin, thus losing in reality what they gain in meaning (p.187). The actual device of the exhibition, otherwise put, involves a ceremonial space-time factor, where all visits are structured, in turn, as rites executed in concert by designers and the public.

- 4 What about this necessarily ritual structure in a demythified environment? Should we see its new—regressive—face in the allegedly playful and festive practice to which our changing, mutant museums are opening their doors, in favour of a distracted consumption, following blurred rites which are infantile rather than childish, forgetful of the anxious depths and serious demands made by investigating the world that the child invests in his game? Doesn't this practice merely sign the impossibility of a way of critically relating with a world where myths are forever being invented and played out all over again, without plots? Does it, in a word, reflect the inevitable process of the corruption of a utopia, the utopia of an institution that was conceived in a shared way, where the acknowledgement of the poetic absolute didn't stop accompanying and nurturing the burgeoning of critical freedom?