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## **TEXT AND CONTEXT: DEVELOPING A MUSEUM BY REFLECTING ITS HISTORY**

In his book *The Clothing of Clio. A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth Century Britain and France*, published in 1984<sup>1</sup>, Stephen Bann developed the idea of an *ironic* Museum: which, as he pointed out, should support alternative readings or versions of the exhibited objects, for example present them as goods robbed in the course of imperialistic warfares as well as objects important for the cultural discourse which was a result of their dislocation. More generally, Stephen Bann defined the ironic Museum as a Museum able to work on its display with two different rhetoric tropoi, Metonymy and Synecdoche, that is - as he put it - the technique to disperse and isolate as well as the technic to integrate or combine different things into a whole, taking thus the chance to reflect the intrinsic rules which conduct our perception as well as museal display.

Looking back, I find that the idea of an ironic Museum which I first gained knowledge about ten years ago, was, at that time, the key I had been looking for in the course of a research which had led me to the conclusion that the basic operation of museums has almost nothing to do with science but more or less exclusively with rhetorical forms of argumentation<sup>2</sup>. This research concluded a decade of practical work at museums in the Seventies during which I had tried to contribute to the improvement of museum's social position by, for example, bringing city-planning or the cultural situation of foreign workers into the context of Contemporary Art - however, maybe because I had some success with these and related programs, at the same time triggered a bourgeois opposition which, as it were, finally managed to have me put out of business. Thus forced to rethink my engagement, I came to the idea that if - as Herbert Marcuse wrote in his essay *On the affirmative Character of Culture (1937)*<sup>3</sup> - the museum is indeed the site into which bourgeois society projects its dreams and Utopian projects, it would be a good strategy to thematize them in a specific way, that is take art and its institution, the museum, seriously and process their achievements back to social life. In other words: when I - now almost ten years ago - had the chance to get back into business again I no longer recognized my task in changing the museum from outside but in working out its own *episteme* which I felt would provide more critical aspects regarding the mental state of our society than I could see at that moment.

Here, today, it is actually the first time that I try to expose the concept of my work as an attempt to construct an ironic museum which - for reasons you can imagine - I never did so far. In other words: what I will explain in the following is not a secret since everything I will talk about is done and existing, but so far has not been formatted into a text and related to a context shared by a larger audience - in particular not with one out of the town which funds the Museum I shall present. But, as it were, when I organized my thoughts to a text reflecting my efforts along the idea of an ironic Museum I realized that - despite the fact that I am still engaged in this effort - I

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford 1984

<sup>2</sup> Aufklärung oder Verklärung, in: Jörn Rüsen, Wolfgang Ernst, Theodor Grütter (Editors): *Geschichte sehen. Beiträge zur Ästhetik historischer Museen*, Pfaffenweiler 1988, p. 110-123

<sup>3</sup> in *historischer Museen*, Pfaffenweiler 1988, p. 110-123

<sup>3</sup> in: *Kultur: Kultur und Gesellschaft I*, Frankfurt 1965

would be talking about history. Because, for some time, I have felt that yet another paradigm rises, and is beginning to define my work - at least as far as it seems to be able to contextualize even the idea of an ironic Museum. But let me start at the beginning.

To introduce you to the background of my work I would like to read to you a story, more exactly, a fairy tale, which I hope, captures more than any history could do the dynamic of the psycho-historic context within which I develop my text. This fairy tale is entitled

#### THE YOUNG MAN AND THE DIRTY LITTLE TOWN and is a fiction based on some true events<sup>4</sup>.

Once upon a time, there lived a young man who was born into a family which had achieved great affluence in a short time through its business activities. But the young man did not want to become a businessman or an entrepreneur. He was more interested in politics and the finer things of life. So he traveled around, studied various subjects in big cities, became involved in several political associations and indulged in expressing radical thoughts.

However, his family did not agree with this lifestyle and his father in particular was very concerned about what would become of his son.

Then something unexpected happened. The young man's grandparents died suddenly, one shortly after the other and, to the surprise and annoyance of the whole family, left him the lion's share of their enormous fortune.

But the grandparents had known exactly what they were doing. For when the young man claimed his inheritance, he declared that he did not intend to keep most of this unearned income but to use it for the benefit of the community at large.

The young man lived in a town which had been particularly ravaged by industrialization and had become very ugly and dirty as a result. The town was also reputed to have no tradition or culture and its inhabitants to be interested only in survival. And that was true. For the town was relatively young and inhabited almost exclusively by workers and factory owners, that is to say people who for one reason or another had neither the money nor the time to spend reflecting on their lives.

The young man was very conscious of this and it hurt him. For he loved his home town and he reacted to prejudice against it as if the criticism were aimed at him personally. So to the astonishment of his friends and family, he decided to stay in this little, dirty and cultureless town despite his great wealth, which would have allowed him a comfortable life anywhere in the world, and to do everything in his power, as he put it himself, "to interest our art-forsaken industrial region in modern art".

However, he had only a vague notion of how to go about this. On the advice of some friends, he decided first to establish a museum in his town following the example of aristocratic traditions. But he was not sure what kind of museum he ought to found either, so he began to collect all sorts of different items: natural history and ethnography, arts and crafts and fine art. He hoped that the museum building, which he commissioned from the architect who had built his father's villa and which was to be located in a prominent position in the town, would unite the collections.

When the shell of the museum building was completed two years later, the young man realized that this project was not much different to what he had been trying to change. Disappointed and perplexed, he discontinued the construction work and sought new inspiration.

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<sup>4</sup> translation by David Ward

Then came another unexpected event in the young man's life. He discovered a report in an art magazine about an unusual foreign artist and architect whose work he greatly liked. As he himself later wrote, he recognized "at a glance that this was the path for the future, the path which led to beauty via reason". That very same day, he sent a telegram announcing his intention to visit the artist.

The young man and the much older artist immediately hit it off and agreed on a mutually beneficial form of collaboration. For the commission to develop the museum gave the artist the long-awaited opportunity to implement his ideas on a grand scale - accepting the fact that this was to take place only in a dirty little town. The young man, on the other hand, saw the artist's involvement as the opportunity finally to achieve his desire to overcome the ugliness of everyday life and make people happy.

For the interior of the museum, the artist developed a new design concept which was regarded as truly revolutionary by his contemporaries. However, the museum gained importance not only because of its unusual interior design but also because the young man, under the influence of the experienced artist, altered the thematic concept of his museum, turned his attention to contemporary art and rapidly built up a collection which contained important works by artists who later became world-renowned.

The dirty little town thus received the world's first museum for contemporary art. It was a splendid museum which became famous within just a few years and a place of pilgrimage for artists and art enthusiasts.

But the townspeople understood none of this. They saw it as an intrusion and reacted increasingly aggressively to what they regarded as impertinent behavior. For the young man, soon realizing that he could not achieve his objective with the museum alone, had not restricted himself to the museum but begun to involve himself in all kinds of campaigns in the town's daily life.

What he called his "art mission" was now aimed at making "beauty once again the dominating power in life". In short, the reorganization of social life through art. So the young man did everything he could to attract excellent artists to the town, to obtain commissions for them, to establish an artists' colony, workshops and a teaching institute. And people came from far and wide to see what had suddenly become of the dirty little town. And they praised and supported the young man. And he became famous and had a lot of friends.

However, the people who came to see what the young man had done or organized also saw that the town had remained small, dirty and cultureless; that the young man - despite all his good deeds - was not accepted by the inhabitants of the town but was regarded as a crackpot and good-for-nothing and was even scorned.

But the young man did not give up. Instead he tried now to change the town itself. He bought an entire hill on the edge of the town and invited the most celebrated architects of his days to build a garden city, an artists' colony and a large school devoted to the integration of all arts. For he was now convinced that he would only be able to realize his utopia, his *Gesamtkunstwerk Gesellschaft*, if the living conditions of the people were improved.

Yet the young man made only slow progress with this project since he needed the approval of the people from the town to achieve it. And virtually all of them were mistrustful and did not want to follow the young man.

Consequently, only a small part of what was planned was actually built. And other broad initiatives which the young man had launched increasingly did not make as much progress as he had hoped.

And yet another unexpected event happened. A major war broke out. Nobody was interested in art and the aesthetic improvement of life any longer. But the young man, who was now no longer

quite so young, lost a large part of his possessions due to the war, had to economize and even sell some of the items from his Museum to which he had become very attached. Finally, his wife - tired of his exclusive interest in art - left him and ran off with another young man to seek the simple country life.

Then the young man fell ill and died.

After the young man's death, a dispute flared up about what was to do with his estate. The young man had decreed that the Museum should be handed over to the town. But the town was neither willing to pay the purchase price demanded by the heirs nor to guarantee that the Museum would be preserved in the same state it was received. The town felt that it was automatically entitled to the Museum and everything its "son" had created.

But at a big city people had recognized the importance of the Museum and were prepared to fulfill all the conditions. Thus the administrator of the estate, who took the young man's wishes seriously and believed in his ideas, sold the entire museum to the big city. And as a result the dirty little town was once again just a dirty little town. And from now on, it also had the reputation of being a town where the people understood nothing about culture and were too stupid to give such an important matter the treatment it deserved.

Most people in the dirty little town did not really care about the whole business. Some were angry about the sale of the Museum since they believed that they had been cheated out of what was rightfully theirs and theirs alone. But others were sad about the loss and regarded the whole affair as an additional blemish on the town. And many of them abandoned all hope of the town ever becoming more beautiful and more interesting and left as soon as they could.

But because the town was still young and not very much had happened there yet, the story of the young man's failure became the town's main talking point. People discovered that in other cases too the town had not been able to preserve valuable things and so the case of the young man became symbolic of the fact that nobody could achieve anything in this town. All those who wanted to achieve something, especially the young people, constantly had the example of the young man before their eyes and so they left as soon as they could. Others who came to the town only stayed for a short time. When they heard the story of the young man, which was repeatedly recounted by those who wanted to make something of their lives, they realized that it would be difficult for them to achieve anything in this town and preferred to try elsewhere.

But those who did not manage to leave the town in time were regarded as losers. So the little, dirty and cultureless town not only remained a dirty little cultureless town, it also gained the reputation of being a losers' town. And anyone who came from this town or lived there was treated with malicious condescension by people living in other places.

Those who had remained in the town reacted defiantly and defended their home town against outsiders or people who wanted to change things. They insisted on being right and only accepted people into their community who agreed with them or fawned on them. As a result, many people came to the town who had failed elsewhere and thus added to its reputation of being a town of losers.

But even those who had stayed in the town eventually had to admit that the young man had been very important for the town and that it had been a mistake to reject all his ideas and not to keep his Museum. For this Museum was now making the big city which had bought it world famous, whereas people just made fun of the dirty little town. And the young man was now more and more frequently referred to as the town's first son.

And because the pressure grew, it was decided many years later to start again from scratch and to found a municipal art museum. It was dedicated primarily to a painter who had originally been brought to the town by the young man himself and who had stayed there. But a short time later,

others came who did not agree with this painter's work and plundered the Museum. But at the same time, they renamed it after the young man. So he finally got his Museum in the dirty little town, although his name was misused for something he had not intended.

Then came a second war. And almost everything which had remained was burned and lost forever.

After the second war, the Museum was re-established in the young man's name. Now people tried to reconstruct the old collection. But this was virtually impossible since the old collection had been sold and comparable works of art had meanwhile become so expensive that the little town could not pay the prices. Nevertheless, the Museum did gain a certain reputation. But the more people attempted to cover up what had happened, the more insistent became the questions about its history. Everything which happened in the Museum was measured against what had once been and the more time elapsed, the more dazzling the lost history appeared and the less possible it became to meet the resulting expectations.

So the young man, the town's first son, unintentionally and surreptitiously became the town's enemy. And sooner or later, this contradiction defeated everyone who worked at the Museum.

This story I found some three years ago; it is, I believe, quite a plausible explanation of what has happened in Hagen in consequence of the initiatives of Karl Ernst Osthaus between the years 1900 and 1921, and of what still has an effect upon the life within this town as well; this text is obviously a narrative - and not objectifying - approach to describe what Hans Sedlmayer would call the *endothymic* ground the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum is based upon. How far, if ever, this story transports any truth and could be verified by a scientific research, I hardly can say - and actually is not of interest. Since this story functions in many ways as an explicative model of the specific cultural circumstances Hagen offers to those who live within its borders.

It took me quite a lot of time until I came across this text, or speaking in psychoanalytical terms, this script, and was able to recognize my own position in it. Since although I did have some notion of the history of the Museum Folkwang, its sale to the City of Essen, and the history of the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum, and I did have a general concept how to cope with it as well, I was thoroughly unprepared as to how to behave within a situation which was and remains virtually marked by the fact that, as Ernst Bloch has put it: *remembered will be in particular what hasn't been carried out*.

Thus, with my first two exhibitions, I lumbered quite naively right into the scarcely tilled field of the Hagen Collective Memory. These two exhibitions I did some months after I was elected director of the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum, and was established in this function almost overnight: Having lost its small academic staff due to quarrels and sickness of its members, the City of Hagen was in desperate need of someone to carry out the organization of scheduled events. Thus, I took over without any time or opportunity to prepare for the job, nor to do planning, nor to get familiar with the collections and the history of the Museum, but was obliged to carry out the projects my predecessor had left in a half-finished state. Having done this work I felt that it would be necessary to set a formal caesura, that is establish some kind of a demonstrative break, making clear that with my election a new era had begun.

The opening-event had not only to cope with two difficulties - the fact that the Museum was extremely short of money and that I had actually no time to prepare an elaborate debut - but, at the same time, it had to demonstrate to the public, and especially to the art-community, that I would run a completely different program, a program superceding the extremely negative reputation the Museum had acquired over the years before.

The no-budget exhibition I finally started off with was entitled *SILENCE*, and as such was an attempt to transpose John Cages piece *4'33"* into the field of fine arts. Actually I planned it first to be an event with Cage himself, and negotiated with him to come and join which he actually considered. But unfortunately, the Opera-project he prepared at that time in Frankfurt fell victim to flames, and this accident made him flee Germany, and led to a breakdown of our contact as well.

So I stayed without any backup in something like an artist-mode when I opened *SILENCE*. The exhibition exposed the whole Museum which I had cleared out completely including the bookshop in one afternoon to the effect that anything having the character of an image was eliminated. To ensure this I even took off some of the lights illuminating parts of the architecture, and finally demounted the famous Minne-fountain in the main hall by taking off the sculptures.

As one can imagine this exhibition which lasted for three days over a weekend elicited some vivid reactions, especially from people who did not know about it and just bumped into the house, and from the local media where some critics even suggested to fire me right away. But I don't want to talk about that, instead report only on the one really striking experience I had during this event and which, in retrospect, proved to be the most important: At the opening of this exhibition the audience not only behaved as usual and walked throughout the empty spaces just in the same way *as if* something was on display, but would start - as far as they were familiar with the house - to recollect the hanging of its collection from their memories and discuss the works of art I had taken away. Moreover, stripped bare, the architecture of the building came into sight, and became the main topic of the discussions among the people. At the end all focused on one architectural feature, an elaborate art nouveau style wooden railing I had not been able to demount or cover. And it was in this situation that some elder visitors revealed to me that this railing I had believed in to be a relic of the old museum in fact was a replica manufactured in the early Seventies when the building had been extended and renovated.

Thus *SILENCE*, John Cages concept *4'33"*, which up to this moment I myself had taken as a more or less formal idea, proved that it can be operated even outside of a musical setting, and - depending on the context within which it is performed - will evoke quite different 'noises' or texts, here in particular the memory of the Museum which literally crept out of its walls or was projected onto them by the participants of the event.

But far more - what I never had thought of or expected - with this exhibition, by thematizing the empty Museum, a sore point of a greater community was touched as well in a very direct way: Because some visitors, especially the elder ones, comprehended the act of taking away the works of art as a repetition of an historical event: The fact that the Museum had lost its collection twice, once completely in the early twenties, and again, after having been refounded in the early Thirties, in greater parts during the Third Reich, and World War II.

Finally with this experience it became obvious to me that an important aspect or part of the memory of a Museum can be assumed in the minds of community which funds it and might take advantage of what it offers.

This became even more visible at opening of the exhibition which followed *SILENCE*, as a second part. This show I entitled *REVISION*, and it started within the empty museum on a Tuesday morning at the customary opening hours. In the main hall I had built up my office including the inventory of the Museum, and opened the exhibition by asking my (at that time one and only) technician to go down to the storage at get any piece of art he would like to choose. He came back with the painting *Pine Forest* (1908) by Christian Rohlf, a painting which together with about 400 other works by this painter had been confiscated from the Museum's collection

in 1937, but had survived the *Bildersturm*, and, in the early Eighties, finally had been repurchased by sponsors to the Museum as the only piece of art left from its former collection. This painting I put up onto an easel, and presented it in this way to the small audience which had gathered for the opening. I then checked it in the inventory, marked it O.K., and hung it up on the wall at its specific place. This place I had determined before by drawing a virtual line over all walls of the Museum, and by the inventory-number: Working in public for four hours a day over a period of three weeks we hung all the works from the collection which we could display without reframing. That were about one thousand items, a short third of the collection, starting with inventory-number one at the beginning of the line, and thus portraying the collecting-history of the Museum from its refoundation in 1945 up to the day of the exhibition.

No question: REVISION was surely a very brutal exhibition, maybe it would be better termed a performance, which in general gave credit to panels and the better works and made the more informal and the lesser works look very bad. However the exhibition was very instructive. Since one could read from the walls the diverse activities and movement of the directors, their predilections, their hits and flops, relate them to recent art-history, and get an idea of their struggle to cope with the increasing prices of artworks which, for example lead to the fact that the very good but small collection of expressionistic art from the early Sixties on could not be extended.

The most interesting aspect of this event however I found again in the reaction of the audience: While we mounted the show most people did not show any interest in our process, but waited instead, as I was told later, until we were finished - and missed the exhibition since they would not believe in my announcement that after the finissage I had scheduled we would take everything off during one night, and again exhibit just an empty place. But we did, and this caused some turbulence. On the other hand even those people who did come while we worked out our performance, or attended the finissage would primarily search for the well known works of art, and tended to overlook the large rest, making two things quite clear: First, that the standing reproach that museums hide their **true treasures** in storage, and show only what their director like is usually uttered only by a special group of Museum's clients, people which, varying a term of Theodor Adorno's *Introduction to Sociology of Music* I would like to define as "ressentiment-visitors"<sup>5</sup>, a reproach that marks just a general fear that something of importance could have been forgotten or valued at a wrong scale; and second, that the memory of the audience is not a reliable source but tends like any individual memory to keep what somehow elsewhere has been ensured or anchored in a wider context.

Against this very human tendency to deal with things of little actuality, to overlook and finally forget them, REVISION pointed out the function and possible meaning of an artificial memory, here of the inventory-book, and by this made visible again two important facts: First that a museum in spite of its pretension to objectify phenomenon's past in fact develops itself necessarily to a truly individual place, and second, that the content of a Museum, taken only as a stored text, has no meaning at all if it is not related to a context shared by a community whatever kind.

To draw an essence from this little report at this point, I would like to state that already here another aspect of the janus-like character of past in present comes into sight, here vividly as the fundamental dialectics of remembering and forgetting - which are only the two sides of the same phenomene - (human) identity. Memory and amnesia have to be related, and have to work together, otherwise: separated from each other and set absolute they both by different paths lead to chaos and death. Because SILENCE as Cage defined it - *freedom from anyone's intentions* - or

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<sup>5</sup> in: Musiksoziologie, Reinbek 1968

a completely empty space, is an utopian idea or a space in which any being, and surely human beings, can not survive. To live in it, it has to be furnished, at least with memories, whereas, on the other hand, the disability to forget, as for example described by Jorge Luis Borges in his story about Ireneo Funes, the man who could not forget anything, leads to death as well, then any place defined only by memories or relics, like many museums, will cause a death by suffocation. Therefore, only by remembering and forgetting, by reflecting the past within the presence, and by measuring the presence against the past, live and a future are possible.

Now, there were two other exhibitions I like to mention which at least to me turned out to be of great importance for our issue. The first took place in 1988 and was entitled "Vom Trümmerfeld ins Wirtschaftswunderland", that is in a free translation "Rising from the rubble" and was curated by, I better should say: made by Enno Neumann, an art historian. This exhibition knew no boundaries: it mixed whatever stayed as a relic from the time between 1945 to 1955 to a huge, better: gigantic installation not shying away from relating recent experiences to historic knowledge, constructing something like a vast *combined painting* exposing the main topoi of the German postwar iconography. As we moved and fixed about four truckloads of rubbish to install this show, usual handling of objects within a Museum for Contemporary Art came somehow to a definite end, and helped us to develop some freedom with respect to our collection from which I contributed to installations as much as possible.

The second event took place in 1990 and was the result of a collaboration with the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich. This show was entitled at our House *Imitations - The Museum as the Location of the As-If*. It displayed all forms of imitations and fakes, from pure copies, to simulations, reconstructions, reproductions, dummies, and clonings, taking up all media and a wide range of objects and goods from everyday life as well as from science and art. The specialty of the version in our Museum was however that I dragged the exhibition from our white-cube exhibition-space into the permanent collection intending to put this itself, that is so to speak, the *true values*, into a form of subjunctive. I tried to do this for example by labeling all parts of the architecture as false which, as the wooden railing already mentioned, had been somehow redone, and in addition changed certain data on labels to works of art, hung instead of a original painting its copy at the same place, and, more over, declared even two major works from the collection to be copies by relabeling them. In effect, the audience which, I can say, loved the exhibition with great joy touched and questioned absolutely everything within the house - however, actually lost all orientation, and in fact believed just everything it was told by the exhibits.

These striking experiences lead to my believe that there is a chance to redefine the museum as a specific space, a space not only presenting art and artifacts in a more or less neutral manner but by applying the concepts exhibited onto the exhibition space itself, in other words: by having the Museum infected by the exhibits and no longer run as a White Clinic (Ralph Rugoff). Thus these exhibitions encouraged me to believe that even an established and public institution dedicated to Modern and Contemporary Art, could hold a specific reality, a reality telling its own truth. A truth which I hoped to find by considering and applying reconstruction and fiction as serious methods to balance within the dialectics of total freedom as conceived by SILENCE and the prison of a *relentless memory* as represented by the conventional concept of museums.

In this approach to the Museum I found some important support in collaborating with The Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles, which finally lead to the fact that the MJT opened up a branch within our space in 1994. One basis for our collaboration I like to mention here was the research-work performed by Geoffrey Sonnabend, published 1946 in his three vol-



ume work *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*<sup>6</sup>. In this book<sup>7</sup> Sonnabend departed from all previous memory research with the premise that memory is an illusion. Forgetting, he believed, not remembering is the inevitable outcome of all experience. From this perspective, 'We, amnesiacs all, condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present, have created the most elaborate of human constructions, memory, to buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time and the irretrievability of its moments and events'<sup>8</sup>. Sonnabend did not attempt to deny that the experience of memory existed. However, his entire body of work was predicated on the idea that what we experience as memories are in fact confabulations, artificial constructions of our own design built around sterile particles of retained experience which we attempt to make live again by infusions of imaginations.

Here, in this notion of the memory, an interesting parallel can be recognized to Hans Vaihinger's book entitled *The Philosophy of the As-If* which was published in 1911<sup>9</sup> and which nowadays became an important source for system-theorist, namely Paul Watzlawick. Since Vaihinger in his *Philosophy of the As-If* argues that, as thinking is nothing but a serving organic function, it performs fiction as a specific way of logical argumentation which utilizes helping terms or helping constructions to reach its destiny. *Like the Meleagrina margaritifera*, he wrote, *when a grain of sand happens to get caught in her glossy coat, will cover it with mother of pearl she produces herself, transforming the inconspicuous grain into a dazzling pearl, just like that - but even much finer - the psyche, when stimulated, utilizing the logical function transforms sensations to glittering thought-pearls: figments in which a logician might pursue even the secret paths of the acquiring, organic-serving character of the logical function*<sup>10</sup>.

However if in Vaihingers elaborate research which, in this framework I only can mention, one might recognize another striking argumentation to explain, and to give good reasons for the fundamentally fictional character of memories, on the other hand it has to be noted that Sonnabend<sup>11</sup> questioned not only the common assessment of the long term or distant memory but similarly believed that short term or immediate memory is an illusion as well. So, on a number of occasions Sonnabend wrote, 'There is only experience and its decay'<sup>12</sup>, by which he meant to suggest that, what we typically call short term memory, is, in fact, our experiencing the decay of an experience. Consequently he described this process of decay as true memory, which, he held, is, in actuality, our only real connection to the past, as near or distant it may be.

Yet this assessment of the structure of memory can be parallel to theories of perception which, opposing the common division of perception into *recognizing* and *seeing* perception, hold, that the experience and the true structure of perception, like the experience of decay, creates a balanced notion of disperse or even contradictory phenomena and in this sense leads to the experience of bold equivalencies<sup>13</sup>.

However far one chooses to follow Sonnabends theories and their possible parallels in philosophy and art history, there is no question about the fact that, what Sonnabend describes as obliscence, does not necessarily has to be concepted as a form of decay but can be experienced as a form covering the past as well.

<sup>6</sup> Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1946

<sup>7</sup> the following quoted from: Geoffrey Sonnabend's *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*, an Encapsulation by Valentine Worth with Diagrammatic Illustrations by Sona Dora, Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information, West Covina 1991 (a publication of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles)

<sup>8</sup> Sonnabend, *Obliscence*, pp.16

<sup>9</sup> Leipzig, 1911 (Volksausgabe)

<sup>10</sup> Vaihinger, pp. 11

<sup>11</sup> Compare: Worth, pp. 3

<sup>12</sup> Sonnabend, pp. 141

<sup>13</sup> Compare: Max Imdahl, *Giotto*, München 1981, pp. 123

This at least was an experience I had the chance to make Hagen in an exemplary manner. Since questioning the architecture of the Museum, I one day could not oppress the urge to scratch with my key the walls of the holy halls, and by this activated the memory of the building almost unintentionally. Since what I found was - under five layers of white paint - a last, or better first straw-yellow tone which upon professional examination could be proved as the original hue the whole building had been given in 1902. It was only a question of weeks until we had repainted by our own hands the building in that yellow color and in consequence received a very unfamiliar setting for a Museum of Contemporary Art.

In retrospect I see that this experience was something like a turning-point regarding my relationship to the history of this building as well as to the Museum in general. Because this alternative, not White-Cube-white color restored the specific golden gleam of the building, and demanded urgently a reconstruction of the van de Velde-interior which had been destroyed in the Twenties when the Museums-building was operated as an office-building. In 1992, ninety years after the opening of the Folkwang Museum, the original building was renovated and, with funds raised by the citizens and companies of Hagen, it was possible to restore important parts of the old interior designed by Henry van de Velde.

But the interior refurbishment not only served to reconstruct an important art nouveau-work by Henry van de Velde, it also highlighted the traditional idea behind the museum which had distinguished the Folkwang Museum from other museums already when it was originally founded. This idea was based on the perception of the museum building as an organism, as a sophisticated whole whose individual parts - functioning like organs - complement and interact with one another in a specific way. Obviously such a museum posed - and now continues to pose - special conditions for the presentation of fine art. As an organic structure, this museum building is not bound by the fundamental principle governing "normal" museums, namely to present exhibits in a neutral and academically legitimate manner. It calls rather for "responsive or reflective hanging" or, to put it another way, for the development of a *Gemeinschaftskunstwerk*, a *teamwork-artpiece*.

In consequence the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum now had two different hemispheres at its disposal which, along with the idea of a discontinuous history of art, we began to thematize as two different environments for the presentation of art and artifacts. This was possible only by an intense collaboration with different artists who agreed in our experiments to not just hang or drop things within the space but adapt them to defined places and by this evoke customized forms of display. Doing this we developed three basic criteria which should be fulfilled by any solution: first, guarantee the possibility of an autonomous perception of the specific pieces; second, mount them to and balance them in dynamic ensembles holding as different positions as possible; and third, create by this a structure which should be perceived independently from the historical character of the building. Because, as a fourth task, we wanted to keep the chance to present within the building works contemporary to the time of its construction, that is artworks of the late nineteenth century and of Classical Modernism.

At this point I like to present some of the artists respectively their works who contributed to the realization of this concept so far.

First I like to draw your attention to Allan Wexler's *Crate House* we purchased in 1992<sup>14</sup>. It is a white cube roughly two by two meters in dimension, containing for movable racks furnished like cockpits with all items a two-persons household needs. From spoon and refrigerator to a TV-set and a complete sleeping-room, the Crate House supplies an autonomous living-unit, done in an elaborate do-it-yourself technique. And this is why I placed it right in the middle of

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<sup>14</sup> See also: Michael Fehr (Ed.), Allan Wexler - Structures for Reflection, Hagen 1993

the art nouveau *Brunnenhalle*: since here as a *white cube* it thematizes the current mode of art-spaces against a historical avantgardistic setting as well as it turns the idea of the *white cube*, understood as a space excluding life, upside down and, as a last aspect I like to mention here, represents as a do-it-yourself piece the state of the art of our time against the extremely elaborate craftsmanship represented by the Museum's interior furnishings.

Second I would like to name herman de vries' *natural relations*, a major collection of about two thousand drug-plants and herbs, brought together in the eighties from all over the world and organized in a custom-made cupboard by the artist's memory<sup>15</sup>. This piece which represents a lifelong effort to relate the human body to nature via plants I placed in the souterrain of the building, in a space were we believe Karl Ernst Osthaus had his - now lost - collection of natural history items on display. This piece was purchased in 1990, and since two years is accompanied by a herbarium constructed in the classical method which holds all the plants from de vries' collections which are growing in the vicinity of Hagen. Thus anchored in the local field, *natural relations* finds its counterpart in Michael Badura's *Eingeweckter Welt (The Canned World)*, done first in 1967 and as such, at least as far as I know, one of the first artworks dealing with ecological questions. This piece, a rack with about two Hundred jars containing cocktails from all sorts of materials one can find in house and garden, custom-reconstructed for a small room in the building, caused a major scandal in Hagen when we purchased it in 1992: Because it houses some life, changes slowly its appearance and for many, especially elderly people, looks just disgusting. Established in our collection as a work of art which reflects our relation to our natural environment it became something like the test-piece dividing our audience in two groups, one of which, the elder and more conservative people we lost over the time as they would not accept this piece in the neighborhood of what they believe in as beautiful works of art.

On the other hand, Johan van Geluwe's *Curator's Cabinet*, which in 1991 was set up as a major contribution to the exhibition "open box - An Exhibition to extend the Idea of Museum", and since then installed permanently, never received much objection though it occupies a very prominent position within the collection of the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum<sup>16</sup>. Located at the upper level of the old part of the building, the 'Curator's Cabinet' functions the focus and turning-point of a tour throughout the presentation of selected examples of modern as well as contemporary art.

As a focus of the presentation it functions as it comments on the historical importance of the world's first Museum for Contemporary Art at its historical site - and superelevates it as well. And as a turning-point of the tour throughout the Museum it works as it induces a general reflection on the nature of museums and their claims as well as it can be read as an ironic comment on the presentation which itself is a part of. Since its imperial setup not only discloses a usually discreet aspect of Museums, the global claim of museal institutions and their agents, but, at the same time reduces museal processings to what they are in fact related to in the really powerful systems within our world - not much more than a play in a sandbox, a theater with borrowed requisites, a symbolic action which legitimizes itself too often only by its forms, a commanding architecture and rites derived from it, instead of that which it is to serve.

Finally I would like close this presentation by focusing on another major work within our collection, in some ways a counter-piece to the installation just mentioned: Sigrid Sigurdsson's

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<sup>15</sup> See: herman de vries, *natural relations - eine skizze*, edited by The Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum Hagen, Nürnberg 1989

<sup>16</sup> See: *Das Kabinett des Konservators von Johan van Geluwe*, edited by The Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum Hagen, Hagen 1996

space entitled *Vor der Stille (In the Face of Silence)*. This project is a work in progress, we began in 1989, and parts of which we purchased in 1993<sup>17</sup>.

*Broadening the eventful here and now*: this sentence by Ernst Bloch one can regard as the guiding principle behind Sigrid Sigurdsson's construction *In the Face of Silence*<sup>18</sup>. Beginning with her own biography, she collects all kinds of material and documents - letters, photos, postcards, newspaper cuttings, forms, plans, maps, diagrams and other records of this century - and arranges them, often annotated with sketches or texts, in very different ways in books and showcases. After a five-year compilation phase (1989-1994), *In the Face of Silence* is now a room defined by its room height, subdivided into 380 compartments, a *lieu de mémoire* currently housing about 730 books, book objects and showcases which, at a rough estimate, contain about 30,000 documents, drawings and objects and which are to be used by visitors: they can be taken out of the compartments, placed on specially provided tables, examined or read there and afterwards replaced into any of the free compartments. Further more *In the Face of Silence* includes a "Visitor's Book" which lies together with writing material on one of the tables ready to receive spontaneous comments by visitors/users. This book, which was initially empty, thus represents not only the respective present and at the same time the history of *In the Face of Silence* in the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum or in other places where the work has been shown; via the "visitors' book", users' comments are directly incorporated into *In the Face of Silence* since the volumes written by visitors (currently about 3,000 pages) are stored on the shelves and can be read like all the other books. In addition, the "visitors' book" is also the gateway through which major contributions by visitors, sometimes whole bundles, reach the artist for processing.

*In the Face of Silence* thus gives the impression of a mixture of archive, library and cabinet of relics, but this construction has no fixed arrangement apart from the fact that the shelves are divided up into compartments. Its use by visitors consists in a constantly changing sequence of books, book objects and showcases on the tables and the shelves. *In the Face of Silence* thus appears to be less an archive than an equivalent to the function of a (collective) memory, particularly if one looks at the details or, in other words, if one begins to read the books and compare their content. But in Sigurdsson's *In the Face of Silence* one can recognize not only the construction of an equivalent to memory and its workings. It is rather the reflection of and artistic reaction to the evolution of *lieux de mémoire*, i.e. of places of memory, which take the place of a *milieu de mémoire*, a vital and living memory: A grand attempt to develop a *lieu de mémoire* into the crystallization point of a *milieu de mémoire* (Pierre Nora).

It should be noted that *In the Face of Silence* is a constructed *lieu de mémoire*, an artificially created place of memory and remains recognizable as such; *In the Face of Silence* is not a relic of a destroyed tradition, not a memorial to an event or person, not any kind of monument intended to serve a regulated memory in so far as (it) attempts to fix a very specific view of the past (Jens Kuhlenkampf) but a construction in which remnants of the process of historicization, the rubbish of historiography so-to-speak - namely what it has not been able to take into account or perceive for whatever reason - are collected and arranged.

However it is not arranged according to the customary taxonomies or criteria of historiography, but according to aspects and with methods which are developed out of the material itself. Therefore, contrary to normal archiving and academic processing, it is not the identical or comparable features of the collected material which emerge but rather its own intrinsic value and its own inherent characteristics, i.e. what makes it special, and not comparable with something else. The

<sup>17</sup> See: Michael Fehr / Barbara Schellewald, Sigrid Sigurdsson's *Vor der Stille* - Ein kollektives Gedächtnis, Köln 1995

<sup>18</sup> This and the following four paragraphs translated by David Ward

result is that these remnants, produce a surplus of meaning which - not covered or restrained by historiography - reaches the user of *In the Face of Silence* directly and activates his own powers of recollection.

You already might have noted that the works I presented so far are dependent on the (art) museum only for practical reasons, but not in their conception. Further more they share a non-linear concept of time and do not integrate into a typical history of art-chronology, because they are still processed, develop their own history, or have been repeated intentionally. Therefore, I believe, these works can have an effect on the museum as an institution which founds its power in particular on chronological development as a given principle. Because this principle can subjugate the past as well as the future, and even permits to concept current developments as historical processes, thus making them judicable by points of view based on history. Though this concept of time has been criticized at large, and from different positions, the museum still functions as one of its best guarded fortresses, and, in consequence of its inability to take up a different concept of time crammed with art and artifacts fitted into the chronological line, some day must collapse. To leave this spiral of ever-lasting progress, and to break with the business founded upon it, is, I believe I can say, the common ground the artists share who have contributed to our collection - and that is certainly true regarding the latest installation which, coming to a conclusion, I would like to present. It is a piece reflecting the history of the Museum in Hagen and entitled *Moderne Kunst aus dem Museum Folkwang (Modern Art from the Museum Folkwang)*, a title, as it were, which was the title of the first catalogue published on the former collection in 1910.

The collection consists of 26 paintings of oil on wood in different formats which show views of the interior and some major works of the collection of the Museum Folkwang as it existed in Hagen between 1902 and 1921, obviously created after contemporary photographs. We received this collection from the *Salon de Fleurus*, a Soho-based non-profit art space dedicated to research on the historical sites of modern art. The collection was accompanied by a note I would like to quote: *The paintings appeared first in the late eighties at Debris, an Antique Shop located on W. Broadway and Grand St., New York, and were acquired by The Salon de Fleurus in 1992. As the owner of this shop remembered, the paintings came into his father's possession in the mid-Fifties as part of the leftovers of the estate of Ernst Fuhrmann. Although the origin of the paintings is not certain (no date or signature) it is presumed that they in fact have been in possession of Ernst Fuhrmann (1880 - 1956), who, as author and publisher, was in 1919 engaged by Karl Ernst Osthaus, the owner and director of the Museum Folkwang, to establish and run the Folkwang-Verlag (Folkwang-Publishing-House) Hagen. Soon an intimate of Osthaus', he also was placed in charge of the Museum Folkwang, and even was nominated to execute the founder's last will when Osthaus fell sick from a severe disease that was to cause his premature death in 1921. In the Thirties, Fuhrmann was prosecuted by the National Socialists for his activities as publisher, and, forced to emigrate, finally settled in New York in 1938, where he died in 1956. It is most likely that Fuhrmann, in remembrance of his time in Hagen, had these paintings created by an anonymous painter, furnishing him with photographs of the Museum and its collection<sup>19</sup>. This is presumed since all the paintings show the same yellow-brown hue. Colored photographs of the motives are not known and most probably never existed.*

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<sup>19</sup> Documents included in the Ernst Fuhrmann-Archive at The Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum prove, that he, already based in New York, tried to obtain photographic material from the *Fotozentrale of the Deutsches Museum in Kunst in Handel und Gewerbe*, he also had been in charge of in the early Twenties, a source, funded by Osthaus, to feed the activities of the Folkwang-Verlag.

I believe you will agree that this a probable story, a story which gives a plausible explanation of the provenance of the paintings, and, further more, a nice story which appends and concludes in some sense the one I read to you in the beginning. And all details it reports on are true indeed, except for the fact, that the artists who run the *Salon de Fleurus*, two years ago took the commission to create these images for our house.

However this commission was not accepted by chance but as a consequence of the art-concept realized at the Salon de Fleurus: To reflect by painting installed in a specific way important events and places of art history such as the *Amory-show* or the *Salon de Fleurus* run by Gertrude Stein and her brother in Paris. However, and this is a principle, the authors working at and with the Salon stay anonymous, as, for their selfunderstanding, they take a position somewhat similar to medieval copyists, artists which primarily handed down and, by this act gave significance to whatever they dealt with. But contrary to medieval artists, the authors of the *Salon de Fleurus* - and that by the way proves them our contemporaries - do not hand down anything by commissions set out by an authority, they rather work with a critical view to art history, its authorities and institutions, acting figures included as well as art-dealers - and in their very own ductus or characteristic style. For example, they continue the work of certain artists who have been long-buried, and extend it into our time, translocate that of others, who might still be among us, in a time past, reconstruct places and events of art history including the history of their effects upon history or, by painting and installation, join people which, with respect to chronology, never would had a chance to meet. In other words, the task of the artists of the Salon de Fleurus is to set an definite end to thinking in chronological terms.

I believe it is quite obvious that, when at the Salon de Fleurus the story of Karl Ernst Osthaus and the effects of his initiatives were heard, one almost spontaneously decided to take the chance and help by one's own means to visualize the trauma the loss of the Museum Folkwang had caused to the soul of the City of Hagen. Since it was clear that Traumata like this one are very typical examples for phenomens which can not be obliterated but are sustained, over times passing, as long as there are oppressed, and can be resolved only as far as they are accepted and integrated as a part of life by those who suffer from them.

However, to somewhat treat the soul of the people in Hagen by including the collection *Moderne Kunst aus dem Museum Folkwang* into our permanent collection, was only one aspect of this move. More important for my understanding is that as far as this piece takes the desire for the lost works of art seriously, but does not serve it in a nostalgic or even revisionistic sense, a chance is opened to turn this desire into a reflection on the potential Osthaus' efforts to change life by art represents: If today this fundamental concept endures only in the insight that the ideology of everlasting progress and growth - naturally promoted by Osthaus as well - indeed is the important obstacle itself which impedes the integration of art and life, any effort to deconstruct this ideology, and its base, thinking in chronological terms, I believe, makes sense and are legitimate. The method in this regard supplied by the Salon de Fleurus to initialize such a process is that of a recontextualization of texts or an aggregation of a text and its context by painting; by images which, as far as they reflect as a text the context within which they are on display, make exactly this context readable as a text itself; thus unfolding something similar to a Möbius-band on which, short-circuiting chronology, the past and the future as well as remembrance and decay, the Old and the New stroll along (Kim Levin), defining the space within which it is spread out as identical with itself, thus giving the chance to come into very close contact with an autopoetic system, and at the same time, to reflect its constitution.

Coming to a conclusion, I like to point out that this, the idea of an autopoetic or self-reproducing system, is the concept which includes, and contextualizes the idea of an ironic museum: While

museums are historical entities which generally have highly a complex structure, this structure does not usually become the subject matter since this would impede its functionalisation for different purposes. To put it another way, wherever possible - also in art museums - the contingency and heterogeneity of collections is suppressed and an attempt is made to present the material in academically legitimized taxonomies. This normally seems to be the only way to assert the value and importance of the material: by using it, stripping it of all coincidences and personal references, as evidence of more or less abstract *canones* and presenting it as an anchor for certain sections of the "great narrative". But this means that most museums are in fact representation machines which point via the material stored inside them to something outside themselves; i.e. they function like pictures through which one looks, almost as if through a window, into an illusory room, into history, the history of art or some of its fields; which are mostly laid out as perspective constructions which draw the viewer inside them and thus not only conceive him not as an historical subject but also tend to uproot him, in a similar way to the media.

Against this common way to design and use museums I hold that it is nevertheless possible to design museums differently, namely as spaces which present the fiction we require to find our bearings in the world, as fiction, and as rooms which comprehend the viewer as an historical subject and emancipate him *vis-à-vis* history. In other words, I believe that is possible to conceptualize museums as systems of second order, systems within which visitors can become observers, observing the rise and decay of orders; finally to conceptualize a museum as a space whose inner organization matches what it organizes, and by this enables us to shift from mere recognizing or seeing perception to a - what I like to call - a structural perception.