

Changes of art

The changing role of art and museums in contemporary society

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If fools rush in where angels fear to tread, to have undertaken to write about art in the rapidly changing Europe of the early 21st century may be folly writ large. Nevertheless, as someone who has been actively involved in the communicating culture for the past two decades, I find it worth the substantial risks to open a dialogue about the changing role of art in contemporary society.

We often treat the notion of 'art' as if it were a coherent and stable concept – a concept that has been with us since the first artists sketched on the rock of the Lascaux caves. This belief that certain concepts have been with us since the dawn of time could be called the 'Flintstones Principle', whereby today's cultural constructions are projected back in time as quasi-historical confirmation for today's practices. Thus Fred, Wilma, and Pebbles depict the nuclear family as an age-old constellation, a solid basis on which to build a post-nuclear world. A close reading of history shows that every idea – small or large – has a starting point, and an evolution. So it is with art. However, rather than starting with the Lascaux caves, let us look instead at the Florentine court of the Medici.

“I am told that he [Piero de Medici] has such a wealth and variety of things that if he wanted to look at each of them in turn it would take him a whole month and he could then begin afresh, and they would give him pleasure since a whole month had now passed since he saw the last.”

Antonio Filarete in his life of Piero de Medici

How was art perceived by one of the greatest patrons of the Renaissance? What purpose did art serve? First of all, it is clear that the category of Art – at least as we understand it today – did not exist. The separation of art, technology, and science only became clear later – starting perhaps with Descartes and

Harvey, and blossoming in the Enlightenment. To the Medici, art was only of a wide range of cultural products meant to demonstrate power, confirm social relations, invoke celestial aid, and above all, to give pleasure. Just as architecture was meant to provide ‘firmitas, commoditas, venustas’ (firmness, commodity, and delight), cultural production – in which we must include the full range of what are now called the decorative or applied arts – was seen primarily as a source of pleasure. Antonio Filarete (c.1400 – 69) described how Piero de Medici, an arthritic invalid, would have himself carried to his studio, where he would pass hours just letting his eyes wander over his treasures – beautifully bound books, sculptures, precious jewels, bronzes. Filarete writes ‘He takes great pleasure and delight in looking at those and in discussing their powers and excellencies.’¹ Pleasure was an important aspect of ideas about beauty, as William of Auvergne writes in the 13th century ‘we call a thing visually beautiful when of its own accord it gives pleasure to spectators and delight to the vision.’²

The main business of art, then, was to give pleasure, and the artist’s job was to create objects of beauty. This is not to say that nothing else was important. The making of art was also the making of meaning, and in the case of the talismans, devices, and allegories popular in the late Renaissance, the invocation of divine or angelic powers. However the fruits of the cunning human hand – art – was seen alongside ‘mirabilia’ – baroque pearls, strangely-shaped corals, the skeletons of deformed foetuses – tributes to the unfathomable majesty of God’s creation and his shaping of a world of wonders. Nature was God’s book, open to all to see, and our task was to learn how to read it – to make meaning out of the signs God had inscribed. Meaning pervaded all forms of cultural production, and from the humblest chalice to the most exalted altarpiece, artists worked to confirm the dominant truths of a militantly Christian society.

Nevertheless, while humanist artists and scholars worked in concert to create meaning, the patrons were often more concerned that the artist use only real lapis lazuli for the azure robes of the Virgin, and could fly into a rage if a cheaper compound was substituted. The relative status of the arts can be estimated from the inventory of Piero’s vast collection – which included bronze statues by Donatello, paintings by Uccello, Fra Angelico, and Pollaiuolo, and countless pieces of lavishly decorated furniture, tableware, tapestries, and jewellery. Nevertheless, the most valuable object in his entire estate – worth more than a year’s working capital of the Medici bank – was a carved unicorn horn³. As Cooper-Greenhill writes ‘it was clear that the jewels, the carved vessels, and the “curiosities” were valued, at least in financial terms, far more highly than the commissioned contents of the house... The paintings by Masaccio, Uccello, Pollaiuolo, Fra Angelico, and Benozzo Gozzoli, now regarded as “priceless treasures”, were, in the Medici Palace, wall decorations...’⁴ an impression confirmed when the Medici possessions were put up for sale in 1494.

It is clear that in the intervening centuries, something has happened to our understanding of what art is and what it is for.

¹ in Cooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge; London: 1992 p.29

² Umberto Eco *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Yale; London: 1986 p.67

³ Cooper-Greenhill, op.cit p.768 The horn was highly prized for its putative ability to ‘sweat’ in the presence of poison

⁴ Cooper-Greenhill, op.cit p.70

“just as artisans had become labourers, now citizens became mere consumers. The allegation is that thanks to the pervasiveness of media and the complexity of issues, people are losing the tendency to form their own opinions. We might say that post-modern consumers are ceasing to spin their own yarns, figuratively, every bit as much as the artisans of industrialised Britain stopped spinning their own yarns literally.”

Malcolm McCullough in Abstracting Craft

It is one of the paradoxes of cultural history that the birth of the Individual in the late Renaissance, and the increasing importance of the individual artist during the next centuries, coincides in the first instance with the birth of modern science and the increasingly mechanical understanding of the human body, and with the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of machine-aided mass production.

Beginning in the late 18th century, a social and economic earth tremor transformed the nature of Western society and European economy - the 'Industrial Revolution'. While we should be cautious of over-rating the importance of this so-called revolution – European society had already been transformed by the introduction of separated script (9th century), the banking system (14th century), the printing press, and the discovery of the New World (both 15th century) – coming as it did at a time when the prevailing magical description of the world was giving way to a mechanical, rational one, the harnessing of machines to create new products had an enormous impact.

Responding in part to the gradual disappearance of the rural countryside as it gave way to factories and railway rights of way; the Romantics looked back to an Arcadian Paradise, populated by rustics, shepherds, and obliging milkmaids. Others glorified the wildness of Nature, and the heroic struggle of the Individual against the elements. Artists sought out the mountaintops, the countryside, the Antique – all uncontaminated by the blight of the new industrial economy.

In particular, however, the new technologies had an impact on the applied arts. Although technologies of various kinds had always been employed in the creation of objects for use – from armour to armoires – now the full might of the industrial process could be brought to bear on the production of articles for household use. Made in greater numbers, for lower costs, these objects soon won a far wider penetration than before. Factory-based industrial process spelled the end of 'cottage industry', and large numbers of people moved from the countryside into the cities, where the industrial machinery was located. At the same time, with a greater proportion of the population engaged in wage labour, consumer goods found a willing market, and demand increased for industrially produced goods. With the growth of an increasingly affluent middle class, bespoke culture slowly gave way to shopping.

The phenomenon of the world exhibition emerged in the middle of the 19th century, and was closely linked to the coming explosion of museum building. Imperial Britain's full-blown mercantilism thrived upon the simultaneous import of raw materials from its colonies and the manufacture and export of finished products, which found its expression in the World's Fair of 1851 – the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations'. After the Fair closed, the profits were so substantial that in the coming years a concert hall, music scholarships, and three new museums – the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum – were founded with the proceeds.

Hand-in-hand with the celebration of the new industrial paradise came a reaction – from those such as William Morris and John Ruskin, who looked back nostalgically to an idyllic past, and from others who looked ahead to a future wherein human labour would be freed and transformed by technology. Confronted with the ugliness of industrial production, a whole new series of museums was founded on the conviction that culture was morally uplifting for the masses, and that exposure to beauty would create a new class of cultivated workers and factory owners, ready and willing to infuse industrial production with artistic merit, ready to make – and consume – new mass-produced products. In the last three decades of the 19th century, scores of new museums devoted to the Applied Arts were founded in Europe and America, including the museum I currently direct, Frankfurt's Kunstgewerbemuseum, which was founded in 1877 as part of a broad concern for the education of craftworkers and improving the quality of industrial production.

The growing importance of museums – first as repositories for the traces of an idealised Antique past, then as showcases for the fruits of the industrial present – went hand in hand with the dramatic alteration of the economic and social landscape. New industries were run by new industrialists, and new money generated by the industrial economy fuelled a new kind of cultural production. The leading industrialists – eager for acceptance – collected extensively, at first the Old Masters, then increasingly the work of their contemporaries. Many among them founded museums with their private collections – Carnegie, JP Morgan, Frick, Mellon, Getty, Thyssen-Bornemisza – the list is a long one. At the same time, tax-supported museums slowly began to become cultural players in their own right, and began to buy and collect aggressively. The Museum of Modern Art, the LACMA, the Metropolitan are only a few examples of publicly supported museums that started to change the face of cultural production with their practices of collecting and exhibition. Soon it was not just collectors and galleries, but curators, who were making and breaking artists' reputations. This was especially true with modern art, which deliberately challenged many of the conventions about what art was or should be. Many of these conventions had their origins in an aesthetics of pleasure that recalled the Renaissance. Nevertheless, artists, collectors, and curators alike began to reject the aesthetics of pleasure as old-fashioned, and the emphasis in art has shifted almost completely from giving pleasure, to making meaning.

This shift, however, is not without its consequences. First among them is that meaning becomes increasingly individual, and increasingly hermetic. But hermetic texts need hermeneutic readers, and works from the Wilderness need prophets to announce their coming. The 20th century has not been without its prophets, certainly. The Gimpel brothers, Alfred Barr, Peggy Guggenheim, Nicolas Serota,

Jean-Christoph Amman all championed a modern art of meaning-making. From Jackson Pollack to Frank Stella, from Joseph Beuys to Art and Language, from Fluxus to Actionism, Marina Abramowicz to Marc Quinn, contemporary art has a great deal to do with making meaning. This shift of emphasis towards obsessive meaning-making can be seen not only in the art itself, but in the writing about art – of all periods. James Elkins writes ‘Consider that Vasari allots a little over two pages to Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, while Leo Steinberg’s essay fills 113 pages – it is over sixty times longer than Vasari’s account. Giogione’s *Tempesta*... attracted only two sentences... during the sixteenth century: Marcantonio Michiel’s annotation “a little landscape on canvas with [a] storm [and a] gypsy and [a] soldier was by Giorgione”; and “another picture of a gypsy and a shepherd in a landscape with a bridge.” Today the painting has been the principal subject of at least three books, and on the order of 150 essays and other notices.’⁵

Meaning-making has always been a part of cultural production, from the Lascaux caves to the present. Meaning-making can be compared to literacy – the reader must know how to make meaning from the jumble of signs with which she is confronted – be they letters of an alphabet, the receding lines of conventional perspective, a pile of bricks, or the taped monologue of a necrophiliac actionist in the Mexican desert. The narrative codes of the Renaissance were widely shared – the Bible provided a common framework for meaning, as did later texts such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Classical literature. Pictorial codes were equally understood, whether the Byzantine conventions of icon painting, or later representational mimesis. Beginning with the invention of the printing press, and continuing to the development of the worldwide web, the exponential growth of information has increasingly undermined the ability to speak of a common visual ‘language’, based on what Lyotard called the ‘les grands narratives’. If any single feature defines the post-modern world, it is the ubiquity and superfluity of information. On the one hand, this means the near impossibility of uninterpreted, untranslated contemporary art, while on the other hand, it means that the mass media – not the arts – now completely dominate the construction of the few cultural codes we share. But where does this leave us? – with Joseph Beuys in the MMK, and Puff Daddy on MTV, Marc Quinn in the Tate Modern, and Benetton posters in the Tube. The meaning of contemporary art must be carefully teased out in our temples of culture by a new class of high priests, while in the world around us we are overwhelmed by cultural information that crosses over all boundaries, and hips, hops, and scratches – but ultimately anaesthetises us into a state of waking somnambulism. Has art become so marginalised, so impotent that it can no longer speak the language of its own time without simultaneous translation?

Perhaps the way forward is not to be found in trying to define what art is, but in how it is experienced. In this way, perhaps the dimensions of both meaning-making and pleasure can once again find each other on the common ground of art in its broadest sense.

“I look for the first time at this thing that I have found. I note what I have said about its form, and I am perplexed. Then I ask myself the

⁵ James Elkins *Why are our pictures puzzles?* Routledge; New York: 1999 p.24

question: Who made this?... my first stir of thought has been to think of making. The idea of making is the first and most human of ideas. 'To explain' is never anything more than to describe a way of making: it is merely to remake it in thought."

Paul Valery, in Man and the Seashell.

A recurring figure in children's literature and in childhood memories is the rag-and-bones man, the collector, the junk-man, the shabby bearded figure with his cart, his new-pots-for-old singsong and his assortment of marvellous and wonderful things, brought like stories of far-off Byzantium by Water Rat in *Wind in the Willows*. He would appear one summer morning and wend his way down the street, stopping to chat with passers-by, children, sharpening housewives' knives and rummaging through his collection of oddities to show us yet another marvel; the inside of an electric motor, a set of old gears, a battered salt cellar of obviously great antiquity and value.

What magic there was in collecting! Treasures to be found here and there, at first rocks and curiously shaped things, like the spring of an old watch, or the heavy spikes used to fasten down railway ties. As time went by, the collecting became more knowing and directed: stamps, baseball cards, lead soldiers, their paint worn and chipped. Still later, fleamarkets and jumble sales fuelled the growing collections, which were stored carefully, prized acquisitions placed in special boxes, others grouped together on a particular shelf or hidden in a secret drawer. Collecting was a joyful process; of sniffing and snooping, of sifting through countless objects to find the best one, a nascent connoisseurship, an apprenticeship in acquisition and discernment. And collecting soon gave way to exploring collections, and rummaging in fleamarkets gave birth to a practice of museum-going.

What makes this process so compelling, this engagement with objects and the stories they can tell?

The collecting of objects for their religious, talismanic or fetishistic powers is one of the oldest human practices. The word 'fetish' was originally used to describe an 'inanimate object worshipped by primitive peoples for its supposedly inherent magical powers or being inhabited by a spirit', and it has subsequently, through the works of Freud and his followers become a part of the psychological and anthropological lexicon of the 20th century. Both Freud, and Marx before him, were concerned with how objects become separate from people and endowed with special properties.

For Freud, the identification was bound to attributing sexual significance to the object, for Marx, with the alienation of the products of human hands and their 'reification' as other than the creative subject. These arguments can be applied to a whole range of psychic responses to displayed objects, the mainspring of the passion for collecting. Fetishism is about the capacity to find magic in the world of objects, to endow a world of objects profoundly other than ourselves with value.

We must of course be cautious about to broad a use of the word 'Other'. All social practices are fundamentally relational, says Bourdieu, and 'social functions are social fictions'. Moreover, 'It is in the relation between the rules themselves and the sense of the rules that engenders the issues and constitutes the values, which, even while they do not exist outside of this relation, impose themselves within it with a necessity and an absolute evidence. It is this original form of fetishism that is the principle behind all action.'⁶ Nevertheless, the perceived Otherness of the object, be it a relational artifact or not, fuels our fetishistic impulse.

However there is also an immediate appreciation for the object as made, for the instrumentality of its making, for the joy that must still be resident, even as a memory of its manipulation. 'Joy was in every ingredient of our making' says Kahn, 'When the world was an ooze without any shape or direction, there must have been this force of Joy that prevailed everywhere and that was reaching out to express.' We gravitate to the object in the measure the expression it extends to us.

This is true of all objects, to the degree to which their presence speaks of their making. We invest objects with powers to the extent to which we can participate in them, in their history, in their making, in the intellectual and emotional process of reliving their conception. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki speaks of the 'sheen of antiquity' much prized by the Oriental cultures. 'In both Chinese and Japanese the words describing this glow describe a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object after long years of handling -- which is to say grime...we do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colours and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them. Living in these old houses among these old objects is in some mysterious way a source of peace and repose.'⁷

Dwelling and the saga of making; twin passions that engage the viewer and the object, that draw from the viewer an engaged participation. It is this engagement that is the phenomenological keystone to the museum enterprise. The visitor must be able to live through the objects he experiences.

These objects do not exist in a universe of their own; they belong to a human world, a world of human actors. There is no object that is not embedded in some language: a system of rules for its own understanding. 'One may legitimately approach a work of ancient art as an object to be deciphered' says the celebrated Soviet linguist and semiotician Boris Uspensky 'and attempt to elucidate its particular LANGUAGE of artistic devices...' It is a fundamental observation, well-substantiated by now, that our experience is largely mediated, and that objects from all cultures must be decoded in order to be apprehended, let alone appreciated in their fullness.

But does not the object itself give us some clues, like poetry, to its possible reconstruction? Are not the joys of intellectual exploration necessary to this decoding those same joys which fuel the desire to create, to collect, to see? To create is to imbue with meaning, and furthermore, to expect that this meaning be

⁶ Bourdieu, P. and Darbel, A. *L'amour de l'art*, Paris: Editions de minuit; 1969

⁷ Tanizaki, J. *In Praise of Shadows*, New Haven: Leete's Island Books; 1977

withdrawn by others. What can we say about the deep delight the visitor draws from delving into the object itself?

“Under the beneficent influence of the Company, our customs are saturated by chance. The buyer of a dozen amphorae of Damascene wine will not be surprised if one contains a talisman or a snake. [...] no book is published without some discrepancy in each one of the copies. Scribes take a secret oath to omit, to interpolate, to change.”

Jorge Luis Borges, The Lottery of Babylon, in [Ficciones](#)

Now, on the threshold of the 21st century, we are once again in a moment of transition – economic, social, and cultural. We are now facing another period of unprecedented rapid change, heralded by some as the ‘Information Revolution’, the ‘Third Knowledge Revolution, or Alvin Toffler’s now old-fashioned phrase, as the ‘Third Wave’. The future of the museum is inextricably linked to the future of the economy – so what characterises this turbulent moment in history? What makes the new economy so truly new?

With information playing an increasingly important role in delivering products more effectively and more efficiently, we have seen the European economy moving from a product-based economy towards a service-based economy – much as it earlier moved from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. In a sense we could describe this as a shift from a 'high-volume' economy, wherein industry makes a lot of products and sells them each at a profit – to a 'high-value' economy, wherein profit is made by being more flexible, more responsive, more creative. If we are to continue to justify our Euro-lifestyle - and pay our Euro-taxes - it is imperative that this shift towards a high-value economy be made as quickly as possible. It is now taught in management schools that, in the words of Arie de Geus, ‘the only sustainable competitive advantage is to learn faster than the competition’. The market now clearly favours brains over brawn (as can be seen by the market value of a firm such as Microsoft) – and the skills needed by the new workforce are those of creativity, flexibility, and the ability to respond to change. A federal Europe is in the making, but it needs a population for whom learning is a way of life, not an isolated event.

The consumer is now in control – and is in the position to choose among an almost limitless range of goods, services, and activities, from a virtually global menu. As Lou Gerstner, CEO of IBM said at an OECD conference in Canada ‘Control... has been tacitly transferred into the hands of tens of millions – soon hundreds of millions of users worldwide.’ Differentiation is the key to attracting and holding an increasingly educated, discerning, and fickle audience. It is no longer a question of being the only show in town – or the only channel on the television. However, just because the consumer is flooded with choices, it doesn’t mean that the market itself can generate innovation. As Nordstrom and Ridderstrale write, ‘gallery visitors did not tell Picasso to invent cubism...customers function as rearview mirrors.

They are extremely conservative, boring, lack imagination, and don't know their own minds.⁸ Companies must innovate constantly, and risk being ahead of demand, in order to create new markets and profit by serving them.

As Nick Negroponte says 'we are moving from a world of atoms to a world of bits.' But as the 'global village' of Marshal McLuhan becomes a reality, it also becomes a far less stable place than it used to be. Like it or not, change is a fact of life, and the competitive pressures on businesses, governments, and institutions alike are overwhelming. Everyone must compete – standing still is the fastest way to go backwards in a rapidly changing world. Increasingly businesses see that 'wealth flows directly from innovation... wealth is not gained by perfecting the known.' To compete means innovation, and as Nordstrom and Ridderstrale note, 'innovation requires experimentation. Experiments are risky. We can succeed or fail. So, an innovative environment must have an exceptionally high tolerance for mistakes'⁹This is easier said than done, for the price of failure is often merciless and high. This has consequences throughout the new economy – 'in a world of change, the learners shall inherit the earth, and the learned will be perfectly suited to a world that no longer exists.'

If we are to live in the kind of world that appears to be in the making – a world in which the global real-time communication is a reality – it is clear that meaning-making will continue to play an important role. In such a changing world, the role of our institutions, however, will have to change. Instead of being 'ivory towers' or temples of culture, where the new truths are preached by curator-priests, the museum must become a new 'piazza', where people chart their own course, explore information in their own way, and discover the joy of lifelong learning. The museum must become, in the words of Jonathan Miller, 'a place where we discover that the life of the mind is a pleasure.' The museum thus can be seen as a motor for the learning society, not just a treasure house, a place where exploration, questioning, discovery, in short – meaning-making – plays the central role. Making meaning and pleasure meet in the museum of the 21st century.

Just as the museum's role must change substantially, so too must our understanding of art. While on the one hand, more and more art is being made for museums, and its value created by museums, increasingly art itself can be found outside the museum's walls. Performance art has been a feature on the cultural landscape for decades. Land art and installations reshape and redefine the landscape, for a month, for a week, for a day, for an hour. The work of Andrew Goldsworthy may only last an afternoon – and be encountered by only a handful of flesh-and-blood observers – it's existence sustained largely through the medium of photography. He speaks of the North Pole, the site of one series of works, as 'the earth's common – an ever changing landscape in which whatever I make will soon disappear.' Other artists are investing the urban landscape with new meaning. A recent project in London enhanced derelict building sites with museum-like labels, 'Wall 1956, mixed media installation: bricks, wood, nails 225 x 425 cm'. Artists such as Mona Haloum, shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1995 with her piece 'Light Entry, a construction of stacked metal battery chicken cages, says 'I like to introduce psychological disturbance

⁸ Nordstrom and Ridderstrale, *Funky Business*, FT.com; London: 2000 p.158

⁹ Nordstrom and Ridderstrale, *op. cit.* p.192

into a situation that would otherwise be perceived as completely normal. I like to question everything... It's working on the basic human anxieties. Making the world around you a foreign place.'¹⁰
Questioning, thought-provoking, meaning-making – important skills, perhaps, for the new economy.

Almost all intentional activity can be art if it is so conceived. A labelled building site, a circle of icicles held together by spit until the sun melts them away, a pair of shoes left on the sidewalk. Art invites the viewer to take an active role in making meaning, and as meaning-making itself becomes all-pervasive, so indeed does art. Perhaps the future of art is that of Borges' Babylon, when the extravagant richness, the hermetic secrecy, but above all aleatoric complexity of meaning-making creates a world in which everything is art, and our eyes open with pleasure once again – child-like – to a world of wonders.

¹⁰ in an interview with Alison Roberts in [High Life](#), December 2000, p.115

Man in the Middle

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The 20th century is often described as a period marked by increasing abstraction – and increasing alienation. The mechanisation of both mass production and mass destruction, the rapid development of the global economic infrastructure, and the collapse of time and space by means of technology helped create a society in which the role of the individual – socially, politically, economically – is called profoundly into question. In this new Copernican revolution, Man found himself exiled to the periphery of the universe, powerless in the face of economic and social forces seemingly beyond his control. At the same time, master of new technologies, and commanding new wealth, Man has unleashed the forces of nature, and irrevocably changed the face of the planet. Faced with the question of Man's place in the universe, the artist is torn. On the one hand she is infected by a post-modern cynicism, her faith shattered by the collapse of the grand narratives. On the other hand, the Millennium seemed to call for a renewed optimism, an optimism now challenged by global terrorism and the collapse of the Twin Towers. Man in the middle, man caught in the middle. How can we respond to the dilemma of the new century?

As I am not a specialist in the art of the last century, I would like to look instead at a history I know better, the culture of the late Renaissance, as a quarry from which to mine ideas to help us better understand the paradox of the early 21st century.

The Renaissance is usually portrayed as the great awakening from the long and troubled sleep of the Dark Ages following the Fall of Rome to the repeated attacks by Germanic tribes in the 4th and 5th centuries. While it is now recognised that this is an extremely one-dimensional and fundamentally misleading view of early Christian society, and a complete misrepresentation of the rich culture of the Middle Ages, nevertheless, there are certain features that begin to first appear in the Renaissance. Foremost among these is a renewed optimism, tempered of course by Christian humility, that saw life as more than a 'vale of tears' culminating in an other-worldly Paradise, and saw Man as a potent and potentially redeemable actor, standing in the middle of social, cultural and spiritual life.

To understand the late Renaissance one must understand the tension between the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle - the one idealist, the other, materialist. Conveyed through the Dark Ages by the idealism of St. Augustine, the platonic metaphor of watching the shadows of truth dance against the wall of the earthly cave of our experience flowered into the neo-platonic doctrine of the microcosm and the macrocosm. The doctrine had already existed for some time – Isidorus of Seville, a 7th century mystic, described this doctrine in great detail, and created an elegant diagram of the three worlds and their four qualities. The three worlds were described as the terrestrial world of Man, the celestial world of the angels and angelic forces, and the super-celestial world of God. The four humours of Man - phlegmatic, sanguine, melancholy and choleric - corresponded to the four elements of the world, and the four seasons of the year. In the late Renaissance, this belief in correspondences between the macrocosm and microcosm was widely held, and took the form described above. The doctrine argued that the ‘lesser world’ of Man is a reflection of the divine order in the ‘greater world’ of God, and that angels and star demons played a role in mediating between the world of God and the world of Man. Central to the theory of the microcosm and the macrocosm was the belief that the world was alive, and had a soul – the *animus mundi*. By discovering the secrets of the microcosm, the late Renaissance adept could come to know the ultimate order of the macrocosm – the mind of God. From this belief grew a rich crop of philosophic systems which described in great detail the correspondences between the order found in the world of nature, and human experience.

Leonardo’s ideal figure, a man defiantly set within a circle and a square, arms outstretched, was only one of dozens of similar figures that proclaimed the consonance of the microcosm Man with the divinely ordained mathematical proportions of the Macrocosm. There was no question of a proportion adequately representing beauty, it *was* beauty. In the same way, neither did a talisman need to represent an abstract quality, it *was* the quality. It must be emphasised that in the Renaissance there are no gaps between thought and signs and between signs and reality, as there was later to be in Descartes. To the Renaissance thinker, relations between objects, numbers, and images were real relations, and they did not stand for relations in an arbitrary way. Equally, words and signs were knowledge, they did not stand for knowledge. This approach thereby avoids one of the key problems of modern epistemology, that of the adequacy of relation between ideas and things, words and ideas. This adequation of sign and signified underpinned the intellectual edifice on which was founded the intellectual practice of the late Renaissance.

Thus, in Giulio Camillo’s famous memory theatre, the fact of having certain objects was purported to unlock the secret knowledge they represented. In Camillo’s theatre, Ciceronian texts placed beneath seats in a Vitruvian theatre was claimed by Camillo to allow the user to magically access the knowledge they represented. As Yates wrote in her now classic book, *The Art of Memory*, ‘As well as providing a magically activated [...] memory system for actors, the Theatre also magically activated the speeches the orator remembered by it, infusing them with planetary virtue through which they would have magical effects on the hearers’¹. Thus, she continues, ‘Renaissance Hermetic man believes that he has divine powers; he can form a magic memory through which he grasps the world, reflecting the divine macrocosm in the microcosm of his divine *mens*.’² To survey a text was to possess the secret knowledge it represented. To possess a talisman was to be custodian of the astral influences it commanded. To survey was to possess. To possess was to command. To command was to conjure.

To the Renaissance natural philosopher, nothing moved without something to move it. Even the firmament was kept in motion by legions of angels – how else could the stars and planets move in their spheres? Newton’s self-winding celestial mechanics was still just a point on the distant horizon. According to the neo-platonic system of the microcosm and the macrocosm, much of human affairs was affected by influences emanating from the celestial world of the stars. These influences could be ‘captured’ by creating symbols and objects, such as talismans, symbols, and emblems that resonated with the astral influences. Moreover, these emblems and talismans could convey the power they represented, and were believed to be a form of ‘operative magic’ – harnessing the powers of the stars to effect human ends. In the late Renaissance tradition visual imagery has a particular sacredness, that the image not only represents, but captures something of, or participates in the nature of that which is represented. Such a belief, as elaborated by a Renaissance magus such as Cornelius Agrippa of Nettelsheim, depends profoundly on seeing the entire cosmos as a single unified whole. As Gombrich writes ‘The gravity with which the casuistry of the emblem and device was discussed by otherwise sane and intelligent people remains an inexplicable freak of fashion unless we understand that for them a truth condensed into a visual image was somehow nearer to the realm of absolute truth than one expressed in words.’³ To the Renaissance thinker, talismans, by their very nature, drew down the power of the angels. Thus the choice of symbols to represent oneself or one’s power was a very serious business, as they actively attract astral forces, and influenced real events in the world.

The stars and their movements thus played a major role in Renaissance thinking, their influence far greater than mere astronomy. Giordano Bruno was a Dominican who became convinced that his own version of mystical ‘Egyptian’ Hermetic philosophy held out the promise to heal the confessional rift. Writing in Latin, or an exceptionally poetic vernacular, he travelled throughout Europe preaching a mystical pantheism in which the sun played a central role. Without fully understanding the astronomical issues involved, he nevertheless championed the Copernican system with its solar focus. In 1583 he was invited to the Elizabethan court (Elizabeth prided herself on her fluent Italian) and discoursed on the Copernican system in Oxford in a debate in honour of the Polish noble Laski, who was later to entice Dee on a new continental adventure. Bruno was in Prague in 1588 just before being summoned to Venice, where a dissatisfied employer betrayed him to the Inquisition. Bruno was burned for heresy February 17, 1600, and is often mistakenly cited as a martyr to the cause of science for defending Copernicanism as part of his solar mystical programme.

Were there museums during this period? Generally speaking, few institutions with even rudimentary museum-like features existed until the Renaissance, with the exception of ecclesiastical, royal, or imperial collections designed either to impress, to convert, or to hoard. The cultural or aesthetic value of objects in these collections was largely beside the point. Elaborately ornamented vessels both secular and liturgical, made of jewels or precious metals, were routinely broken up, melted down, or traded to pay for wars or ransoms, with little or no evidence that they were conserved as objects in their own right. These collections were as close in spirit to the modern museum as a bank would be.

With the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, new texts found their way to the West. In particular the court of the Medici princes in Florence showed a renewed

interest in the works of Plato, whose idealism appealed strongly to the Renaissance mind seeking new directions after centuries of Aristotelian scholasticism. At roughly the same time Gutenberg invented the printing press, and no lesser figure than Luther declared that the invention of printing was 'God's highest act of Grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward'. As a consequence of these two roughly simultaneous circumstances, the authority of the texts that sustained both Church and State was called into question. On the one hand, the new texts from the Christian Orient, in particular the texts of Hermes Trismegistus, putatively of an antiquity equal to those of Moses, gave rise to a belief that more powerful texts could be found on which to base temporal and religious power. On the other hand, the sheer quantity and variety of texts made possible by the invention of movable type made it impossible for the exclusive authority of the canonical texts to be maintained.

How then should we understand the Cabinets of Curiosity and *Kunstkammern* of the Renaissance? Were they proto-museums, as is often claimed, the first tentative attempts to conserve, organise, study and exhibit? Seen against the intellectual background of the Renaissance, I believe we are obliged to say no. Within a culture in which object, image and text were considered equivalent, the *Kunstkammer* of the Renaissance, whether the *studiolo* of Cosimo di Medici, the *Kunstkammer* of Rudolph II, or the *guardaroba* of Aldrovandi, were themselves new kinds of texts, written in images and objects⁴. Nor were these texts neutral. Often planned according to the new neo-platonic principles by which ordering the microcosm invoked the powers of the macrocosm, these cabinets were explicitly meant as instruments of power, either temporal power, the monarch at the centre of his cabinet, commanding the known world in miniature, or the spiritual power as elaborate memory systems, in which elements stood for the text of the Book of Nature, a *theatrum naturae*. In either case, the cabinets were meant as powerful alternative texts, challenges to the weakening authority of the religious and philosophical texts of the Church. The object of the Renaissance cabinet of curiosity, at least in its most developed form, was power.

At the same time as neo-platonic thinkers tried to elaborate new and more powerful texts, the authority of the text was being challenged by a new voice, that of observation. Galileo, Kepler and Bacon, each of them immersed in late Renaissance culture, all nevertheless attempted to put observation in the balance as a counterweight to the authority of the text. Renaissance humanism, while founded on a profound belief in the text, nevertheless, in privileging the role of Man, legitimised the argument that Man's frail and easily deceived observations could nonetheless constitute a legitimate challenge to textual authority.

Many of the features of the late Renaissance landscape reappear in the 20th century, while others disappear. Brunelleschi's discovery of perspective – which placed the artist's observing eye at the centre of the frame and dominated painting since the Renaissance – was called radically into question by Picasso, Braque and Gris. The hard won centre, which had triumphed over the fragmented visual narratives of the late Middle Ages, fell to Cubism in the early 20th century, which privileged the new decentred eye of multiple observations. The universality of shared viewing was challenged – only man was at the centre, not Man. Starting with Heidegger, the 20th century witnessed a neo-platonic, or at very least, idealist, Renaissance, following the Aristotelian materialism of the late 19th century. The authority of canonical texts – what Jean Lyotard called the 'grand narratives' – was also called into question, just

as the observations made with Galileo's telescope called into question the teaching of the Church and spheres of Ptolemy. Roland Barthes declared the author dead and Jacques Derrida argued the validity of multiple and infinite readings by multiple and countless readers. In a post-structuralist world, each reader was now an author, creating her own text, and her own meaning. Every reader was now at the centre of her own memory theatre. The coherent world of universal progress, universal values, and universal exhibitions so confidently championed by the Positivists of the late 19th century splintered into a dazzling multi-coloured world of self-generated and self-referential fragments. In a new Copernican revolution, Man was once again exiled from the privileged centre to the edge – to become only one of many voices orbiting meaning.

Since WWII, artists have been engaged in new forms of meaning-making. Much of this art is based on the creation of private, personal languages – the artist at the centre. The role of the artist is to invite us to think, to reflect, to exercise our newly found authorial powers to create new readings, new meaning – the viewer at the centre. The world of art is a theatrum mundi – the new macrocosm, from which each viewer draws down powers. This art also needs its magi – Alfred Barr, Susan Sonntag, Jean Christof Ammann – to draw down the power of the angels to the microcosm of Man through a new secular 'operative magic'. Through the act of making meaning the viewer recovers the hope of shared experience in a world of multiple but solitary eyes. Through the experience of meaning-making, man can once again become Man, and recover his place at the centre.

In an infinite universe, every point is the centre. Like the mystical book at the heart of Borges' 'Library of Babel', with an infinite number of infinitely thin pages, whose unthinkable middle page has no reverse, Man in all his variety is once again in the middle, at the centre of a universe of meaning and mean-making. However, this power comes with a price – now the centre is everywhere and nowhere.

¹Yates, F.A. The Art of Memory, London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul; 1966 p. 168

² opcit: 172

³ quoted in Gordon, D.J., Orgel, S. The Renaissance Imagination, Berkeley: University of California Press;1980

⁴ see Paula Findlen, Possessing Nature, Berkeley: University of California; 1994