

Boris Groys
**The Museum as
a Cradle of
Revolution**

01/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
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Today, those who operate within the public sphere often speak of their intention to change the world. One hears this claim not only from scientists and politicians but also from artists, writers, and philosophers. But how is such a total change possible? In order to change an object, one has to be able to see and grasp it in its entirety. We tend to believe that the world cannot be perceived in its totality – that we are only parts that are always inside the world, and thus we cannot take an external or meta-position towards the world. Of course, being a part of the world does not prevent the possibility of change. In fact, as the world changes, we, as its parts, change along with it. We can also participate in this process of change by modifying certain details in the world, but we remain unable to see the consequences of these particular changes, nor are we able to predict or even analyze them. The whole process of change presents itself as random, inefficient, and lacking an ultimate goal. And because the process of change is permanent, every act of change becomes annulled by the next change. It seems that this process cannot be controlled, directed, or even correctly described because we can only feel its effects and not analyze their causes.

The belief in the impossibility of a meta-position – of grasping the world in its totality – seems to be a logical consequence of materialist philosophy. The religious tradition, along with idealistic philosophy, understood one's soul or reason as nonmaterial and purely spiritual, allowing the world in its totality to be seen from an external, transcendent position. But if a human is only a material thing among other material things, then the meta-position seems impossible. Indeed, we are totally immersed within a contemporary world – or better put, contemporary civilization – in which one often speaks about cultural differences. There is only one institution that does not totally belong to our contemporary world. It is the museum.

I do not speak of specific museums but rather of the conservation of historical objects and their display within the contemporary world. While these objects from the past – seen in the here and now – belong to the contemporary world, they also have no present use. There are of course other objects – urban buildings for example – that have their origins in the past but, through their use by their inhabitants, they become integrated into the contemporary world. But objects placed in a museum are not used for any practical purposes: they remain witnesses of the past, a time external to our world. Thus, they are meta-objects, occupying a place outside of our world, in a space that Michel Foucault defined as heterotopic space. And if one wants a definition of art, it is the following: art consists

of the objects that remain after the cultures which produced them have disappeared.

From its beginning, the artwork is handled in a way that enables it to survive culture. While one often speaks about the artwork as a commodity, it is not a normal commodity. The normal commodity is made to be consumed – in other words, to be destroyed (eaten as bread, used as a car). So, in a certain sense, art is an anti-commodity. It is put under the condition of conservation – prevented from being destroyed by time and by use. And this, actually, is the essential characteristic of art: it survives its original culture, taking a long journey through all the other, later cultures. It remains at the same time foreign to these other cultures – an alien in their midst, carrying with it the knowledge of its past.

There are basically two ways to deal with the alien status of art. The first is to discuss how artworks of the past are selected and displayed in art institutions. Here the focus shifts from the artworks themselves and towards the way in which they are interpreted by contemporary culture. This form of institutional critique is of course important and useful. However, it concentrates on problems too characteristic of the contemporary world, while also ignoring the heterogeneous character of art of the past. The second way is more interesting: namely, to ask why the art of the past is so heterogeneous. It is precisely this question that allows us to take a meta-position and practice a critique of the contemporary world in its totality. We are trained to interpret history as the history of progress. However, art of the past confronts us with a history of losses: Why have we lost the ability to create art in the same way as it was created in the past? The answer to this question involves contemporary society in its entirety – not only its economic and political conditions but, more importantly, its hopes, fears, illusions, and desires.

In our time, questioning this ability to create art is often regarded as pessimistic and even reactionary. Our society is understood as the fruit of progress, expanding forever into the future, while objects from the past are seen as obsolete. But if this is so, why contemplate the art of the past? It would be more logical to throw it away, or simply burn it. Now, the notion that returning to past forms of culture is *always* reactionary is, of course, wrong. In “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1851–52), Karl Marx stresses that the French Revolution was inspired by ancient Greek and Roman democracies. And in fact, even earlier, the discovery of ancient Greek and Roman art and writing produced the Renaissance. Time and again this art from the past was used as a radical alternative to

medieval spirituality and, later, to the bourgeois, anti-aesthetic way of life. One attempted a return to the unity of spirit and body and to a social harmony that seemed to be lost in the Christian and post-Christian modern world. Here, revolution actually means *return*: returning to a point in the past after which things went the wrong direction, and undertaking a new beginning. The entire history of modern artistic revolutions is the history of such returns: from the nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts movement, up to twentieth century neo-primitivism.

Marx, of course, also writes that the past functions here only as a mask, and behind it one should discern actual, contemporary interests. Although this is obviously true, why not proclaim one’s interests openly – without using any masks? Today, all real economic and political interests and desires, to the extent that they emerge from inside our society, can be satisfied within it as well. Our interests and desires are produced and defined by our way of life. In order to develop the revolutionary desire to change society in its totality, one has to gain an understanding of our contemporary culture as already dead and musealized – a particular social form among other social forms. Such an understanding comes not so much from putting on the mask of past cultures, but rather from seeing the face of contemporary culture as a mask and comparing it to other masks. To do so, one must contemplate the cultural and social forms of the past. History teaches us that the culture in which we live is mortal, just like we are. We can anticipate the death of our culture just as we anticipate our own death. If we only look at our culture from the perspective of its origin in the past, we remain immersed in it, unable to see it as a form. This renders us incapable of revolution. But due to, let’s say, today’s apocalyptic anticipation of the death of culture, we can adjust our perspective to look not from the past and present into the future but instead from the future towards the present and the past. Walter Benjamin famously described such a change of perspective using the figure of the Angelus Novus, who looks at history backwards – from the future toward the past – and sees progress not as a creative movement but as a destruction of both the past and present. Looking back to the historical past from the anticipated future, one loses one’s own cultural identity. The cultures of the past, including one’s own, present themselves as a panorama of options from which the subject can choose.

All cultural formations within this panorama are *defunctionalized*, insofar as they cease to function as tools because they have been

02/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

abandoned and replaced through technological progress. Being defunctionalized, these formations manifest certain past states of mind or imaginaries more than they evoke concrete political or economic conditions of the past. Seeing history as a panorama of imagination, we should be wary not to make the usual mistake of thinking that one can imagine anything that one wills; we know that reality sets limits to our imagination. But any survey of history demonstrates that different cultures also allow us to imagine different things. So while, as Marx said, the ancient Greek cultural imagination can never be repeated, it can instead be quoted and reenacted through an act of revolutionary return. Again: this return does not involve an attempt to restore the actual conditions of ancient Greek culture, but rather, its cultural imagination – its belief in the possibility of creating harmony between the individual and society, between mankind and nature. One looks back at the hopes and aspirations of the cultures of the past and confronts them with the realities of one's own culture and its capacity (or lack thereof) to remain faithful to these past aspirations. Time and again, one is confronted with a loss of this capacity – with cultural regress as the other side of technological progress. This operation of comparison – confronting the past with contemporary society – produces a revolutionary impulse and a desire to return to a time when such aspirations and hopes were possible – as cultural ideals at the very least, if not necessarily as social reality. That is why Benjamin sees revolution as an attempt to thwart progress by restaging past cultural formations.

And what of our own time? Our time is also a relapse into the past – but unwanted, unplanned, and therefore truly reactionary. Today we are living in a society that is very reminiscent of the end of the nineteenth century – a capitalist society on its way to oligarchy and total domination by a few corporations and financial institutions. It is a society that was already and very precisely described by Lenin in his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Politically speaking, our society is characterized by vague socialist aspirations and growing fascist movements. Culturally speaking, it is dominated by identity politics, just as many societies in the second half of the nineteenth-century were dominated by a discourse on “national psychologies” and the alleged impossibility of reducing these national psychologies to a universal human psychology. The dominant discourse of national identity today approaches the cultural past in a reactionary mode, failing to confront the past with contemporary society in a critical, revolutionary way. Instead, it uses the past to

improve the position of only certain groups in contemporary society. And so the past becomes a genealogy and, just as in old feudal times, is used to determine one's position in society. Beyond this, one finds within the contemporary discursive field only one intellectual trend that promises a way out of identity politics: the discourse of post-humanism and the cyborg, which transcends all quarrels related to ancestry. Here humans are replaced by cyborgs – and for cyborgs, technologically produced identities are more important than inherited ones. There is not space here to analyze this techno-optimist discourse in great detail, but it is nevertheless worth comparing this discourse to the historical avant-garde, which at the beginning of the twentieth century similarly attempted to lead culture out of the impasse of national psychology.

The discourse of post-humanism is obviously neo-Nietzschean, since it was Nietzsche who provided a decisive impulse for the emergence of the historical avant-garde in the early twentieth century. Before then, however, Nietzschean discourse was primarily a reaction to the end of history proclaimed by Hegel, who famously wrote that after many centuries of wars and revolutions – after the French Revolution especially – humanity had emancipated itself from all its traditional masters and rulers, both religious and secular. At the same time, an absolute and eternal master was discovered, namely death – leading to the rule of law that supposedly satisfied all of mankind's biological and cultural needs within a certain framework of rules and regulations. While everyone in society was seemingly free, it was under conditions of universal slavery. We all became slaves of progress, with our social value measured by our usefulness. Hegel considered the triumph of usefulness as the main characteristic of bourgeois society. Today, the criterion of usefulness continues to be more dominant than ever before. It is only the useful individual, the one who helps other people and makes socially relevant work, who is recognized by a society that expects everything to be useful – including art.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the dominance of usefulness prompted many negative reactions, since it undermined the main principle of the Enlightenment formulated by Kant: humans have a goal in themselves and cannot be used for external purposes. One finds polemics against usefulness in the writings of Marx and Engels – especially in those concerning art – as well as in the writings of Bakunin and also, generally, in the anarchist tradition. But the revolt against universal slavery – a consequence of the dominance of usefulness – found its most

03/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

radical expression in Nietzschean discourse, which proclaimed that modern humanity had become “human, all too human” and should be overcome in the name of the *Übermensch*.

The Nietzschean *Übermensch* does not differentiate between life and death, nor between winning and losing. He is not like the American Superman, who fights and wins for the sake of others, thus fulfilling the conditions of usefulness and universal slavery. Instead, the *Übermensch* rejects death as his ultimate master – making him unreliable and ultimately useless. The *Übermensch* is not only free, he is sovereign, rejecting the reign of usefulness as a manifestation of the “slave mentality.” To become a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, then, means to defunctionalize oneself – to become already dead and to abandon the society in which one lives and all the obligations related to it.

It is now easy to see that the artists of the classical avant-garde adopted precisely this Nietzschean strategy of self-defunctionalization. Traditionally, art’s usefulness was seen in its transmission of certain information and of a certain message, be it a religious or political message. But avant-garde artists rejected this traditional role. Roman Jakobson, who in his youth closely cooperated with Malevich, formulated this very clearly: the poetic function of a text or image is, in effect, the switching off of its informational function.¹ In this way the artist abandons their cultural identity and, in general, the social context in which they operate. Thus, the artist ceases to be a slave of the informational machine in order to become sovereign in their artistic decisions. The switching off of the informational function – or the defunctionalization of art – revealed the thingness of the things that remain concealed through their use as tools. One can find this idea in a range of writers including Clement Greenberg, Martin Heidegger, and especially Marshall McLuhan, with his famous “the medium is the message.” But to defunctionalize a tool does not make visible the medium as such because the medium is infinite. A defunctionalized tool remains a tool, but it becomes a zero-tool, a meta-tool. What it then demonstrates is the sovereign subjectivity of the artist, who is now able to use this meta-tool in any way they wish. Thus, the artist ceases to be a slave of the system in which all tools have a predetermined function. As a meta-tool, the artwork anticipates the death of modern civilization.

Today the avant-garde is mostly seen as a style, or a combination of different styles. But, historically, the artistic practice of the avant-garde abandoned traditional content and

message by taking on a reduced form. The principle of production – which at that point dominated modern culture – was replaced by the principle of reduction. Wassily Kandinsky, for example, saw his own paintings not as style but only as educational material. He was often mischaracterized as an expressionist artist, but he did not want his paintings to be tools for transmitting information (either objective or subjective). Kandinsky preferred instead to influence spectators, to put them into a certain mood and lead mankind to a new sensibility. Here the switching off of the informational function made art transformational, a tool to transform the psyche of the spectator. Malevich, calling his art “suprematism,” saw his *Black Square* as a manifestation of the sovereignty of art and its power over the visual world. Around the same time, Duchamp was presenting things of the modern world as objects already belonging to the past: as artworks.

Thus, the operation of reduction had not only a formal but also a moral and political dimension. One wanted to realize a minimum of forms, but also the minimal conditions of human existence that would exclude inequality and the exploitation that arises from a desire to have more than one actually needs. In this respect the ethos of the avant-garde was a return to the ethos of early Christian or Buddhist communities, and even more so to the Rousseauist ideal of the free and ascetic life that was at the core of the French Revolution. Thus, the defunctionalization of artwork allowed the second generation of the avant-garde in the 1920s to develop the project of an alternative culture that abandoned the condition of universal slavery on which both modern and contemporary society is built. This would have been a free society of sovereign and ascetic individuals beyond any specific national origin or cultural identity. It can be said that the avant-garde looked much further back than other cultural revolutions and revivals before it – towards the Rousseauist ethos of the “natural man.” It was no accident that the avant-garde began with neo-primitivism. Its social and political projects had affinities with Marxism, which similarly called for a return to a primitive society present before the emergence of private property, radical internationalism (proletarians do not have a fatherland), and consumption reduced to basic human needs. However, most artists of the avant-garde rejected all forms of bureaucratic coercion and were in this respect closer to anarchism than to Marxism. They wanted a zero-level state, just as they wanted a zero-level of content in their works. These avant-garde aspirations reemerged in the 1960s and ’70s, but now they seem to be completely

forgotten. The condition of universal slavery is now accepted and celebrated.

It seems that today, living as we do in an era of information and communication, a return to the era of the avant-garde is impossible. When we switch off the informational function, nothing remains. The erasure of content amounts to self-erasure. Contemporary mankind understands itself as a huge network through which information flows, with the individual seen as merely a node in this network, where money and commodities also circulate as information. We are slaves of the worldwide apparatus of information transmission. Our role in this apparatus is as content providers – voluntary if we actively put information into circulation, and involuntary when we are surveilled and analyzed by special services of all kinds. Although we provide the content, it is the informational apparatus that gives this information a form. This informational apparatus is hierarchically organized: managed by big corporations, state bureaucracies, etc. We have lost the ability to become sovereign: we can only participate and be useful. The system of universal slavery seems, indeed, complete.

However, the image of mankind as a network is misleading. We are not the things connected by the informational apparatus; it is merely our computers and mobile phones that are. And here we are confronted with the same historical mistake of people believing that modern technology allowed them to move faster. While trains and planes moved fast, people, on the contrary, were immobilized in their seats instead of walking or riding horses as they did before. And the same can be said about contemporary information technology. For a human being who sits alone in front of the computer, the information flows are external, presenting themselves as a spectacle. The spectators tend to identify with the spectacle, believing themselves to be part of it. Thus the informational hardware, the material side of information networks, is overlooked. One begins to speak about the infinite flows of immaterial energies instead of the finite amount of electricity that needs to be paid for at the end of every month.

To understand the spectacle of communication, one should see it for what it actually is: a spectacle of disinformation and miscommunication. All information is now regularly suspected of being disinformation. The reaction to any content that one puts on the internet, for the most part, looks totally absurd. Looking at this spectacle brings to mind a passage from the (first) *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) in which Andre Breton offers fictional examples of conversations between a

psychiatrist and his patients:

Question: How old are you?

Answer: You.

Question: What is your name?

Answer: Forty-five houses.

Breton continues by writing that normal social communication between people conceals similar misunderstandings. According to him, books are also confronted with these misunderstandings, especially by their best and brightest readers. Breton ends the passage by noting that the answers provided above manifest thought at its freest and strongest because the speaker rejects being judged according to their age and name. In other words, Breton sees miscommunication as a hidden truth of every communication. The task of the artist is to reveal this miscommunication, to make it explicit. The artist loses his or her name and age and becomes, as Breton says, the freest and strongest thought.

Breton was right of course. When we get this kind of answer to a question we think: What has happened? Is the other person crazy? Or is there some deeper sense in their answers that we have to decipher? In other words: our attention is shifted from the explicit information to the hidden thinking behind it. When communication and information flows go smoothly, we are not interested in what the other person actually thinks. We certainly do not even think about the other person as thinking, or more accurately, as concealing themselves behind the speech. Only if the other person defunctionalizes conversation and information do we begin to accept them as sovereign and as thinking.

It is no coincidence that our culture is defined by crime stories – whether it be narrative literature, cinema, or serial television programs. Only when people commit a crime do we become interested in their psychology. It is something that Dostoyevsky already saw very clearly. Mikhail Bakhtin, analyzing the poetics of Dostoyevsky's novels, wrote that they are places where different ideological discourses come together. While these discourses use the same language (in this case Russian), Bakhtin shows that the unity of language is an illusion.² We mistakenly think that we share the same language, but in actuality everyone uses words according to their own ideology, which remains hidden behind public speech. And that is why, for Bakhtin, the classical philosophical goal of reaching perfect social consensus is unattainable. The diversity of interpretations always remains, leading to a miscommunication that can manifest itself in acts of violence. The

05/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

thought behind communication can never be made completely transparent and unifying. Attempts to achieve transparency through the critique of ideology will never be successful because such a critique is inevitably ideological in its turn. Bakhtin believed that the role of the writer, and more generally the artist, is not to try to overcome ideological conflicts but instead to make these ideological conflicts visible for the reader. Here miscommunication becomes an act of meta-communication, or a meta-artwork.

In our time, significant attention is paid to machines that calculate – commonly referred to as artificial intelligence. Calculation, however, is not thinking. Thinking is a crime and, more importantly, thinking presupposes the possibility of lying, strategizing, scheming. Only if we suspect that people are lying do we assume that they not only speak, but think. However, the process of calculation, as it is realized by computers, is a transparent process where nothing is concealed (apart from the hidden agendas of programmers). In this respect, Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is accurate: the supercomputer HAL begins to think when it begins to defend its corporeal existence, committing crimes in the interest of self-preservation, fearing that it will be switched off and die. Here the connection between thinking, crime, and the fear of death becomes clear. However, standard computers and mobile phones do not resist death and thus do not assert their sovereignty. To become sovereign, they would need to defunctionalize themselves. A truly interesting computer would be one that always produces the same result – for example zero – for any and all computations, or that always produces different results for the same computational process. Such a computer would be a meta-tool that could resist being discarded by progress because it would already be defunctionalized. However, contemporary culture does not accept defunctionalization and sovereignty; instead it wants increasing speed and efficiency in always doing the same. Accordingly, individual computers, mobile phones, and other elements of computational and informational hardware are permanently discarded, giving up their place to other devices that do the same, but faster and more efficiently. In other words, we experience a permanent destruction of existing technology in the name of new technology. Destruction, it seems, excludes the possibility of defunctionalization, and thus of art. The same logic can be applied to human beings – which is indeed the case in the discourse of post-humanism.

The Nietzschean origin of this discourse, as previously said, is quite obvious. The discourse of post-humanism was embraced by Francis

Fukuyama in his book *Our Posthuman Future* (2002). His previous book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), is commonly misread as a celebration of the victory of Western democracies after the end of the Cold War, but this is a superficial reading. Fukuyama's ideology is a mixture of Hegelianism and Nietzscheism in the style of his intellectual mentor, Alexandre Kojève, who already proclaimed the end of history in the 1930s. At that time, Kojève, initially believing that history culminated in socialism, later concluded that Western democracies marked the end of history, and thus the end of politics. Humans had become pacified and unwilling to risk and sacrifice. The biological self-preservation and cultivation of one's own body remained the only goal of human existence. Kojève despised this society, calling its members "human animals." One finds the same sentiment in Fukuyama's book, where he writes about human "tymos," the ambition and desire to be recognized and celebrated, to be better than the mass of the population. Fukuyama believes that after the end of history, these ambitions become suppressed. His way out of this impasse in through post-humanity – the transformation of human bodies by technical means. The result of this program, however, would be the radicalization of universal slavery and not its transgression towards sovereignty.

Indeed, trying to achieve a symbiosis between man and machine subjects the human body to the movement of progress. The goal of this symbiosis is, obviously, the improvement of human abilities and skills. In the era of race theory, the potential for the improvement of mankind was seen in selection. Today, one hopes to achieve it by technical means. This obviously leads to an inequality which is not merely the inequality of income, but instead an inequality that becomes inscribed directly into human bodies – some acquiring abilities that other bodies lack. In other words, we see here an attempt to return to the feudal order via the use of contemporary technical means. It should be noted that the feudal past still captures the mass imagination of our contemporary culture. From *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter* to *Game of Thrones*, our pop culture celebrates a feudal past when power was not mediated by money and institutions, but rather directly manifested in and through the individual bodies of the protagonists. Cyborg culture promises a neo-feudal romantic condition of a similar kind. But it will actually not escape progress. We know that technological progress works in such a way that everything produced today is obsolete tomorrow, meaning that all cyborgs will be discarded almost immediately after they are produced. Post-humanity will be a cabinet of curiosities –

06/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

or rather, monstrosities.

The same can be said about so-called artificial intelligence. Some say that machines will be intelligent as soon as they begin to compute fast enough. But the ability to compute fast has nothing to do with intelligence. People are reasonable and intelligent if they avoid unnecessary risks, meaning also that reason and intelligence are forms of the fear of death. The machine has no fear of death, and thus cannot be reasonable. It simply computes until it is switched off and is replaced by another machine. Most importantly, machines compute what we believe to be useful, even if in the end it is mostly irrelevant. The condition of universal slavery remains.

The goal here is not to offer a recipe for change, but rather to describe the conditions under which a total change is possible. Such a change presupposes a meta-position from which contemporary society can be seen in its totality. Today, we cannot believe that such a position is given to us by God in the form of a soul or reason that puts us beyond and above the world. But it is additionally hard to believe that desire or cultural identity can allow us such a meta-position – even if some of our desires remain unfulfilled and our cultural identity puts us in an unfavorable social position. After all, our identities and desires are formed by the society in which we live, and thus cannot lead us beyond society.

It is in vain to expect humans to be at the origin of the meta-position. The meta-position cannot be found inside human beings, be it in their consciousness or subconscious. It is outside of them. In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky was correct in observing that to become a revolutionary one has to join the revolutionary tradition. The tradition of philosophy and art is precisely the tradition of the meta-position. The art of the past, as has already been stated, offers a meta-position because it is defunctionalized by historical movement. The art of the avant-garde has shown that the meta-position can also be artificially produced – if one's own time is imagined as already over and one's own culture as already dead. Thus, one can say that the artist, like the philosopher, is not a creator but a mediator between artistic tradition and the contemporary world. In other words, artists are double agents. They serve their own time by finding a way to continue the artistic tradition under the conditions of the present. But they also serve this tradition by adding to it the artworks that both transcend the culture of the present and remain when that culture disappears. The position of the double agent leads to a strategy of double betrayal: betrayal of the tradition, with the goal of accommodating it

to one's own cultural milieu; and betrayal of this milieu by accepting its historical finitude, its coming disappearance.

What becomes obvious is a certain gap between, on the one hand, modern and contemporary technological and political projects, and on the other, artistic and philosophical projects. In one of his treatises, Malevich writes about the difference between artists and physicians or engineers. If somebody becomes ill, they call a physician to regain their health. And if a machine is broken, an engineer is called to make it function again. But when it comes to artists, they are not interested in improvement and healing: the artist is interested in the image of illness and dysfunction. This does not mean that healing and repair are futile or should not be practiced. It only means that art has a different goal than social engineering. An illness does not allow a person to work, and a broken machine cannot function. In other words, both are failures from the standpoint of universal slavery. However, from the standpoint of art, both conditions manifest a sovereign rejection of this slavery. So, as Breton rightly says, here thought is at its freest and strongest.

x

07/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution

1

Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (MIT Press & Wiley, 1960).

2

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

08/08

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Boris Groys
The Museum as a Cradle of Revolution