

Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan
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Editorial

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The museum may now be assuming a new function in the network. It is being reformatted as a recording device, a flexible memory machine that can store culture like a bank, artworks like a storefront, politics in the form of data. And each of these can be exchanged with one another as currency: the political movement can be turned into an activist archive, sold as an artwork, then exhibited as data, then sealed off in a vault with cultural artifacts for safe keeping. Museums in China are built without staff or contents to fill them long after they are constructed. Others exist online, leaving their buildings to rot. But it would be completely wrong to say that these are the dying gasps of another old-fashioned, overweight institution suffering an identity crisis after its contents got uploaded to the internet. Because more museums are being built today than at any other time in human history.

Are museums being recalibrated as information centers? Is history now the operating system for institutions of art that no longer add to a canon, yet still need historical legitimacy to maintain the financial value of artworks or an image of national heritage?

The construction of new and often private museums in financial centers and free trade zones from Abu Dhabi to Hong Kong seem to point to another function altogether, to a shift in the status of the museum from its conservatorial role in society to one that starts to look increasingly more computational. What are these strange new entities that hoard artworks as financial artifacts and use CAD-designed architecture to advertise a city or state? What do they do and what do they want from us? They are not just vanity enterprises used for laundering money. They are not just playthings for warlords and feudal states. They are not just showrooms for auction houses. Because many are doing the work of traditional museums – collecting, exhibiting, educating. What is new concerns the scale at which they are being built, and the peculiar way they suspend historical consciousness while desperately filling themselves with content.

We have to admit that something very interesting is happening as the archival function of the museum becomes secondary, when the importance of the future or the past is superseded by the utility of the present, by the question of how to format an archive in such a way that it can be recognized and synchronized with other archives, with financial markets but also with the historical disenfranchisement of groups whose losses and pains have not been registered or quantified. These new museums seem to lack a methodology, and yet they are going to work collecting, stockpiling, caching,

and building an archive at incredible speeds. What is this fortune of stuff that is actually being amassed, and how is it reformatting our own consciousness in turn? It may be interchangeable and interoperable with other archives, other markets, and other file systems, but is it legible?

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