

Art Museum as Public Space for Community of Crafts

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Abstract:

The project proposes to re-wire the museum as an integrative public space that bridges daily life activities and art practice. The art practice will mainly focus on the performative aspects in the expertise of artistic techniques used in the process of craft making. The museum looks at art as the realisation of continuous creative process rather than only as finished objects of worship. Through first-hand practical experience, the museum also aims to be a workshop space that stimulates fine awareness to the senses, especially touch and hearing, as an important approach of art appreciation aside from sight. The workshop will subsequently also create opportunities for interaction and exchange of ideas between the general public and professional practitioners of craft art. The new museum re-wires interaction with art through performative practice of craft making. Workshops, practical training, and public events serve as catalyst to blend craft practice into daily public life. Practicing craft making will also gain roles in commercial, leisure and educational activities. Museum participation is, thus, no longer only a carefully curated and predictable interaction with pre-designed artworks, but a result of spontaneous and direct interaction between audiences and the artist/curator. This kind of collaborative interaction will also cultivate exchange of ideas and inspirations between involved actors. The new museum is not a place for finished art to stand still; it is a place for the creation and exchange of creative art. Preserving physical practice of craft making is especially important in the age of digital media, in which art is increasingly accessible in various shapes and virtual platforms. Knowledge and mastery of physical analogue practice is

by no means a form of rejection to digital art. It will instead, enrich our understanding to the necessary process and techniques to bring out the unique characteristics of the given material in an artistic manner. The research about the relationship between craft and art will especially look into the philosophical origin of craft, art, and aesthetics in the Western hemisphere that was developed from the ancient Greek idea of Techne and Poiesis. This research will refer to writings by authors such as Aristotle, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Giorgio Agamben.

Keywords: Art Museum, Public Space, Workshop, Craftsmanship, Poiesis

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Introduction: The Role of Art Museum in Public Life along History

From a historical perspective, the ‘art museum’ as it is understood nowadays, is relatively a recent concept. The idea of both ‘art’ and ‘museum’ originated from Western philosophy around the 17th-18th century as a by-product of Western imperialism.¹ 18th century museums mostly hosted collections of originally cultural artefacts that were expropriated from colonised lands to the museum space. These artefacts were labelled as ‘Art’, which Azoulay argued, had “little if anything to do with care for the shared world.”² She suggested that 18th century art museum was by no means a public space for works of aesthetics, but rather a constitution for the elites to boast their wealth. The museum became an authoritative institution that unanimously judged what is art and what is not.

The post-war contemporary art movement attempts to transform the museum from a “patrician institution of elite culture” to a “populist temple of leisure and entertainment.”³ However, even until today most museums are still far from being public spaces that focuses on contemplation of art as artefacts of cultural importance. Directors of late 20th century art museums regarded artworks more as commercial assets rather than works of cultural importance.⁴ This period was also a turning point when the intensity of visitors’ experience of the museum space became more significant than the aesthetic and cultural values of the artworks.⁵

Bishop argues that these challenges is still present in the 21st century. First, museums face the risk of budget cuts because “access to culture is not perceived as a basic right like education and welfare [by local governments] ... but a luxury that can be farmed out to the private sector”. Secondly, this sector contributes to the privatisation of museums as a “repository of philanthropic narcissism”.⁶ The challenge that museum is driven by elite figures as a medium to display the commodity value of their private collections still persists since the 18th century.

Therefore, this project aims to design the art museum as a public space that highlights the cultural significance of art for the general public. The museum will be a bridge to re-connect the cultural significance of art practice into daily public life. The project will, therefore, emphasise the performative aspects of art practice, especially on the refined techniques applied during the process of craft making. The performative exposition of art will guide audiences to understand the aesthetic essence that originates from the finesse of the artisan's touch. In this way, audiences will be able to appreciate the value of an artwork as a product of cultural practice that has relevance in daily life as well, rather than only as an object of mystification.

The new museum design will empower visitors to experience art through the conscious use of their senses. The traditional way of observing artworks will become an opportunity to develop visual awareness towards visual aesthetics such as form, colour, and proportion. Besides that, first-hand experience of doing the actual practice of creating art in a workshop will develop awareness to performative aesthetics of skill mastery and sense of creativity. Finally, the museum will also become a medium for exchange of creative ideas between the general public and practitioners of crafts. This will promote deeper understanding between involved parties, thus allowing them to find common grounds for mutually beneficial collaborations in the future.

The Linguistic Relationship between Art and Craft

From linguistic perspective, the word 'Art' originated from old French or Latin with the following meanings:

- Old French *art*: "skill, craft, knowledge, deceit, sorcery"
- Latin *ars*: "acquired skill, craftsmanship, stratagem, behaviour, systematic body of knowledge and techniques, profession, artistic achievement."⁷

It was only first used in English around the 14th century. Back then, the word was associated with ‘skill acquired by experience, study, or observation.’⁸ In this period, the nuance of the word underwent a slight shift from the field of professional practice to the field of scholastic study or technical training. However, the general meaning of art at this time still did not point any specific connotation towards aesthetic beauty.

It was only in the Renaissance period did the concept of beauty entered the realm of art.⁹ Read argues that beauty in the Renaissance period is associated with perfection and idealism that is “remote from the actual conditions of daily life”.¹⁰ Read claims that the association of the one absolute beauty and perfection to the word ‘Art’ still remained even in the early 20th century western community. However, Read emphasises that there is no such thing as the absolute beauty and aesthetic perception of beauty varies depending on many factors such as region, culture, or historical period. He concludes that “whether beautiful or ugly, [any] objects may be legitimately described as works of art”.¹¹

In conclusion, from the linguistic perspective, the word ‘Art’ carries the notion of a beautiful work that is produced through professional craftsmanship expertise. However, it is important to note that beauty in this sense is a subjective element that varies from person to person. Furthermore, the mastery of craftsmanship can only be acquired from continuous study or training. The following part will look into the relationship art and craftsmanship further from philosophical and theoretical perspective.

The Philosophy of Craft as Art Production

The ancient Greek philosophy about *poiesis* (production; making) and *techne* (art; craft) has become important keywords to understand the essence of art production. In Aristotle’s time, the term *poiesis* is associated with any act of production with end goal(s) beyond the action itself,¹² i.e., a potter moulds a vase (action) to create a container for flowers and satisfy the

senses of the observer (end goals). Production through *poiesis* in art is therefore more than only the action of form making or composition. *Poesis* also contains the further goals of introducing intangible values into the object, e.g. function, aesthetic beauty.

Meanwhile, *techne* (art; craft) is associated with the technical skills and mastery of tools that makes the act of *poiesis* possible. Aristotle argues that craft is “a state involving true reason concerned with production”.¹³ He explains further that craft is a study of how the object may or may not come to production. According to Sennett, craft is the state of being practically engaged and dedicated to the subject/activity at hand while thinking and doing at the same time. Craft is “to be curious about, to investigate, and to learn from ambiguity” in order to achieve good-quality work without the disconnection between problem-finding and problem-solving.¹⁴ Therefore, the essence of craft lies in the artist himself, not in the object/artwork.

Aesthetic quality and authenticity of an artwork is thus also related to the artist’s sense and intention for the end goal (*poiesis*), and not universally contained in the object. Read also agrees with this view about art. He argues that art “is not the expression in plastic form of any one particular ideal. It is the expression of any ideal which the artist can realize in plastic form.”¹⁵ Read indirectly hints at the artist’s liberty to have any ideal as the end goal that resonates with his own intention. In other words, the production of an object without human intention of further goals in the process is not art. In ‘*The Craftsman*’, Sennett elaborated this as “[an autonomous] drive from within that impels [the practitioner] to work in an expressive way.”¹⁶

However, Aristotle’s philosophy about *poiesis* and *techne* also raises two questions. The first one is about the nature of appreciation (or critics) given by third parties who are not involved in the creation process. If the aesthetic value or meaning of art is not in the object itself, how do curators and audiences measure the value of a finished artwork? The second one is about the validity of aesthetic intention and authenticity. This is especially important in the

age of mechanisation and automation, in which production involves less human involvement and manual crafts.

Poiesis and Aesthetic Appreciation

In ‘*The Question Concerning Technology*’ (1954), Heidegger argues that *poiesis* does not refer to only physical activities of production. He argues that *poiesis* refers to any form of “bringing-forth out of concealment into un-concealment” (*aletheia*/revealing)¹⁷ Craft production is therefore also rooted first in this un-concealment (*aletheia*).¹⁸ Heidegger explains further that technology (*techne*) is then the instrument or the way that enables us to reach *aletheia* and hence understanding.¹⁹ If the essence of *poiesis* (bringing-forth) lies in *aletheia* (un-concealment), and *techne* (technology; technique; skill) is what leads us there, therefore *poiesis* may also occur in the acts of observation, analysis, or exploration using any form of *techne* (intellectual skill, physical dexterity, etc.). It is the *poiesis* (bringing-forth) of aesthetic appreciation within ourselves once we reach *aletheia* (understanding) of the artwork or material at hand. The use of *techne* in this manner to achieve poetic understanding is what Foucault coined as the “technologies of self”. It is the use of *techne* as a means for self-reflection and contemplation to “know oneself” better.²⁰ In the knowledge gained through this understanding, lies the potential for the *poiesis* of new artworks to take place, again, by using *techne* as “technologies of production”.²¹

Nonetheless, Heidegger also mentions the potential threat of machine-powered modern technology. He warns that modern technology mostly functions as a tool to merely respond to the economic chain of demand and supply, especially in the 19th – 20th century. Heidegger claims that *techne* in the modern world no longer involves human’s conscious exploration and pursuit of the essence of the object at hand. He argues that the modern technology reveals the nature of an object only as an extractable resource to satisfy the chain of demand and supply.

This is what Foucault categorises as the “technologies of power”. It is the use of technology as a means of domination and objectification of the subject.²²

Heidegger used the term *gestell* (enframing)²³ to distinguish this from the Ancient Greek’s *poiesis*. As opposed to *poiesis* that leads to deeper and richer understanding about the nature of something, *gestell* confines the understanding about the nature of an object to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The phenomenon of *Gestell* excludes the use of *techne* as an instrument of exploring new potentials of the object at hand. In ‘*The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*’ (1935), Benjamin coined this phenomenon as the destruction of ‘Aura’.

Technology and Authenticity

In his essay, Benjamin argued that ‘Aura’ is an inseparable element of ritual or cultural practice.²⁴ Here, Benjamin views ‘Aura’ as a mystified unique quality that comes from continuous development over a long period of practice. He argues that this refined quality that persists over a long history is what makes an object authentic and meaningful as a work of art. This inherent value cannot be simply imitated by technical or mechanical means.

Benjamin claimed that the modern community is obsessed to dissect into the object and comprehend it as an assembly of mechanically reproducible components.²⁵ He argues that this leads to the destruction of ‘Aura’. It demystifies the inherent cultural values and breaks the object into mechanically replicable components of an assembly. He further commented that the lack of human’s involvement in the production of artwork resulted in the destruction of authenticity and cultural significance (Aura) of the object. Therefore, the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction held more exhibition value than ritual value.²⁶

However, as much as Heidegger and Benjamin agree that modern technology has the potential of fragmenting/enframing our appreciation of an object/artwork, Benjamin failed to see that in technology itself also lies the potential to overcome the threat. Heidegger suggests

that when people use modern technology with continuous reflection and questioning on its essence, modern technology may also become an instrument of *poiesis* (as opposed to *gestell*). Heidegger hints that the practice of poetic art may save technology from its destiny as mere tool of mass reproduction. In other words, technology may become an instrument of authentic production depending on the artist's aesthetic intention to use technology/craft as the "technologies of self" and "technologies of production" rather than the "technologies of power".

The Works of Art in Art Museum

The previous section has established the inseparable relationship between poetic art (*poiesis*) as an intentional production through the use of craft skills (*techne*). Furthermore, *poiesis* is not limited to only physical production. It also refers to the bringing-forth that leads to un-concealment and understanding (*aletheia*). Hence, craft skills also play important roles in art appreciation. Although the acquisition of skill/technology (*techne*) comes along with the possible danger of enframing (*gestell*) or the destruction of 'Aura' that will inhibit *poiesis* from taking place. Continuous reflection and questioning of the essence of *techne* and the object at hand is the important factor to avoid this possible danger. Quoting Agamben's words in 'The Man without Content', "Poetic Art Is Nothing but a Willful, Active, and Productive Use of Our Organs."²⁷ Craft skills and technology (*techne*) are essentially a means to an end regardless of authenticity. Human's conscious mind and wilful intention regarding *techne* and the end goal is the important piece that enables oneself to achieve *poiesis* and avoid *gestell*.

Despite the museum's identity as a public place to promote art along history, the architectural program of museum space mostly remains focused on only the exhibition of end products. Early art museums started as private collections or Wunderkammer of rich people in the Renaissance period. In this period, "art museum" was generally a privileged luxury of the higher, educated class.

From around the 18th – 20th century, art museums and theatres became a place for people to escape from the harsh reality of the industrialised society (*phantasmagoria*).²⁸ The shocks of Industrialisation transformed daily life into a monotonous and repetitive experience, such that people ceased to feel and think for themselves.²⁹ The technological advances and discovery of Industrialisation ‘enframes’ the lives of people into exploitable standing-reserve.³⁰ The absence of human’s conscious mind and wilful intention in their relation to *techne* in the Industrialised society enframed (*gestell*) productive activities into unoriginal mechanical reproduction. Meanwhile, poetic art (*poiesis*) only took place in the form of art appreciation in the phantasmagorical space of museums and theatres that were far from similar to the daily reality.

Thus, art museum (and theatres) of the 18th – 20th century became a space that is not only accessible for the educated and privileged, but also targeted for leisure. Even so, Buck-Morss argues that the experience of *poiesis* in art institutions of this period was ultimately not a genuine and holistic *poiesis*. Their role was “to hide the alienation and fragmentation, the loneliness and the sensual impoverishment of modern existence... and make them sound as if they were still human.”³¹

Art Museum as Public Space for Community of Crafts

The task to re-wire art museum to the neighbourhood and public, thus, requires the museum space itself to also re-establish its relationship to the experience of *poiesis* and *techne*. The art museum needs to re-establish itself from a curated institution for art exhibition and privileged leisure to a collaborative public space for art production and community centre. Management of the un-institutionalised new museum will therefore require mutual co-operation between various members of the public including the local inhabitants, professional craftsmen, designers, and art experts.

Being a public space for art production means that craft workshop for the public will be an important element of the new museum. Besides being a working space for professional craft artists, the public workshop is also a place for learning. Gropius believes that the workshop is an important place for to achieve the “totality of the craftsman”³² as the foundation of the Bauhaus school. Workshop is a place for people to gain fundamental knowledge and expertise about material characteristics and practical understanding of craft tools. The knowledge gained from the workshop will become a means to an end for designers and architecture to achieve better designs. For Gropius, totality of the craftsman requires the integration between knowledge about the process of physical production (craft) and aesthetic design.³³ This perspective about the role of workshop in connection with arts and crafts resonates with Aristotle and Sennett’s view that study about production (problem-finding) and the act of production (problem-solving) –for both physical model and conceptual design– are mutually important for each other.

The existence of the master, who teaches, and the student, who learns from the master, is a prerequisite for the workshop to become a place of learning. Gropius argues that the relationship between the master and the student should have equal standings and stimulate each other in a collaborative manner. The workshop should be more of a laboratory for experimenting things together rather than a school where the teacher holds the highest authority of control.³⁴ Sennett also shares this view that the ideal workshop should give opportunities for students to ask questions to the master. In return, the master of a good workshop is willing enough to provide answers with explanation. This is especially important because in the workshop, there are certain knowledge or insights that only the well-experienced master may instinctively sense, but not the student. In this process, the master makes this tacit knowledge explicit and passes it down to the student.³⁵

Nonetheless, the aforementioned relationship only holds true under the assumption that the student is equally engaged to learn and absorb knowledge as much as the master is willing to listen to the student's concerns and guide the student accordingly. Before the museum can fulfil its role as a public workshop, there is a need to first stimulate the public's interest to learn about crafts. Therefore, the museum also needs to introduce the practice and products of craftsmanship as a part of the public daily life. Before fulfilling its role as a workshop, the museum needs to be a community centre.

The community centre serves as a medium for cultural activities while also considering on how craft may once again have a place as an element of cultural practice. Introducing the essence of craftsmanship, art production, and appreciation through its socio-cultural aspects will open up opportunities for people to develop deeper interest into arts and crafts as an extension of daily life or cultural practice. In this manner, the art museum will have the potential to escape from its 'enframed' destiny of being only a well-curated institution of phantasmagorical leisure.

Conclusion: What the new museum may offer for the larger public?

Escaping from the destiny as an institutionalised place of leisure means that re-wiring the operation of museum management and how the museum will orient itself towards the larger public. As a community centre for cultural activities, the museum needs to be highly accessible and hospitable. The community centre will become a medium for exchanges of idea and collaboration. On the other hand, the museum as a workshop needs to provide privacy for contemplative engagement with arts and crafts. Therefore, the museum organisation should put the community centre as the meeting point that creates connection between the workshop space and the public sphere.

The workshop of the new museum becomes the incubator of the practical skills of craftsmanship (*techne*). The community centre becomes the incubator of art and culture (*poiesis*) that is produced out of the workshop. In other words, the workshop becomes the inner core that shapes the community centre as the outward expression of the museum as a public space for socio-cultural activities. In this manner, the new museum liberates itself from the didactic and exhibition-oriented of the old museum. The new museum cultivates understanding of poetic art and technical craft through the collaborative practices of art production in the workshop and art appreciation in the community centre as a part of daily cultural life.

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Notes:

- ¹ Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Chapter 1
- ² Ibid. p. 66
- ³ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, p. 5
- ⁴ Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," p. 4
- ⁵ Ibid. p. 17
- ⁶ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, p. 63
- ⁷ Merriam-webster, "Art"
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Read, *The Meaning of Art: Herbert Read*, p. 18
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p. 19
- ¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, "Thought, Desire, and Decision"
- ¹³ Ibid., "Craft Knowledge"
- ¹⁴ Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 38; p. 48
- ¹⁵ Read, *The Meaning of Art: Herbert Read*, p.19
- ¹⁶ Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 65
- ¹⁷ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p.317
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p.318
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, p. 18
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 324
- ²⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, part IV
- ²⁵ Ibid. part III
- ²⁶ Ibid. part V
- ²⁷ Agamben, *The Man without Content*, p. 47
- ²⁸ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, part VIII
- ²⁹ Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 33
- ³⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 323

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- ³¹ Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 26
- ³² Gropius, *Bauhaus Reviewed 1919-1933*, On Form and Totality
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid., On Selection and Students
- ³⁵ Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 78