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Donald Preziosi: The Museum and the Zoo: Notes for a Philosophy of the Museum

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(ill. 1) It is a very great pleasure to speak here this evening in Graz, which I remember from my last visit many years ago when I was a student traveling in Austria. Both Graz and I have changed in the meantime: Graz seems to have gotten younger and I seem to have remained the same. But it is very special pleasure to visit this internationally distinguished and important museum, the *Joanneum*, and its uniquely rich and diverse museum studies program. And it is for me a very special experience to speak in this remarkable *Kunsthhaus Graz*, which could be seen as the perfect illustration of what has become the subject of my talk tonight.

(ill.2) I say “*what has become* the subject of my talk” not only because, like many lectures, it was prepared long in advance of visiting where the talk was to be given, but also and more importantly because in the case of tonight’s lecture, what you will hear is in some ways different from the paper that I sent to Professor Karl Stocker a few weeks ago. That paper, which I told Dr Stocker he could freely circulate it to anyone interested, was perhaps meant more to be read than listened to, especially because it was written in English, and so might sound somewhat alien to a German-speaking audience.

I use the word ‘alien’ very deliberately – both to evoke the nickname given to *Kunsthhaus Graz* by its architects Peter Cook & Colin Fournier (‘The friendly alien’) - but also to point our attention to the concept of alienation itself, which really goes to the heart of what I’d like us to think about tonight – the problem of *representation*. The fact that representation and alienation are essentially connected. I’d like us to think together this evening about several issues which are deeply and closely related, and which have been for many centuries. In fact the deep and complex relationships I want to talk about tonight go back to the historical origins of speculation about art, society, representation, and religion. For at the very beginning of documented speculation in Europe about art and society is a very specific and dramatically articulated problem – the proposed *banishment* of art from the ideal society that was projected by the Greek philosopher Plato.

In other words, at the very beginning of Western writing about art and representation was a kind of scandal - the suggestion that art was both beautiful and dangerous. Both comforting and alienating. Like the building we are sitting in tonight.

(ill. 3) In the work of Plato 2500 years ago, and in particular his text about the nature of society and political life that is known in English as ‘The Republic’ (*Politeia* in ancient Greek), he evoked a deep ambivalence about the *power* of art - the ability of art to simultaneously fabricate *and* problematize the hegemonic (political and religious) powers imagined to be materialized, embodied, or ‘represented’ in and as a people’s forms and practices. In other words, the *ambiguity of art* itself in not simply reflecting but in fabricating the world in which we live, the precise problem addressed in *The Republic*.¹ Art itself – and especially what Plato called the representational or mimetic arts – deeply problematized seemingly secure oppositions between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’; ‘history’ and ‘poetry’;

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'reason' and 'emotion'; the 'sacred' and the 'secular'; - distinctions that are the circumstantial *effects* of human artistry.ⁱⁱ What art created for Plato, then, was not some 'second world' alongside the everyday world in which we live; a fictional world of 'fine art' as civilized entertainment. Instead, *what art created was the actual world in which we really do live our daily lives*. The world we inhabit is one that is created by art.

(ill.4) Therefore, for Plato, art was very dangerous: he said that artwork provoked what he called 'divine' or holy terror (*theios phobos*) in the soul or mind of the ordinary citizen. That fear *was the terrifying awareness of precisely this paradox*: that works of art don't simply 'imitate' but rather *create and open up* a world, keeping it in existence, as Heidegger famously put it in discussing the ontologically creative potential of artworks in his essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks*)',ⁱⁱⁱ where the experience of art was understood to be fundamentally 'religious' in nature. Or, more precisely, the idea that art problematized conventional distinctions between the two. What was at issue for Heidegger (no less than for Plato and many philosophical and religious writers at various times) was the truth or falsity of art: is a work of art the imitation of some ideal essence or immutable truth or transcendent reality? Or the product of an independently pre-existing force or spirit or idea? Is a museum, an exhibition, or a collection fact or fiction, whether personal or collective? And what would a 'true' museum or exhibition consist of?

And, if art is believed to 'truthfully' represent some ideal essence, then does it not become *religion*?

(ill.5) Which brings us directly up against the very difficult problem of the relations between (or the distinctions between) art and religion – the fundamental problem today of both art and religion. And this is a problem that lies at the heart of what we imagine museums to be as representational artifacts.

(ill. 6) The basic paradox is essentially this: once staged or put on display, or simply made available to ourselves or others, objects open themselves to *alternative* readings than those that might have been intended by their makers or patrons (including ourselves. In Plato's theocratic utopia (no less than in many of our own religious traditions) those possibilities must be *controlled* and disciplined so as to promote *proper* reading (recall the problem of the museum director or curator as a zookeeper). In the fantasy worlds of theocratic or fundamentalist religion or politics, however, these are no mere abstractions, but matters of life and death: a choice between believing in officially promoted and legally enforced ideologies or narratives, or facing the possibility that if you do not believe, you will be disciplined or even be murdered.

(ill. 7) Plato saw this as the most fundamental dilemma of social and political life; about what should constitute an ideal society in the face of the very dangerous powers of art to both create *and* problematize or ironicize manifestations or expressions of hegemonic political or religious power: art's power as both gloriously seductive and terror-producing and alienating. The representational arts, he argued, should ideally be employed to articulate and give *proper or appropriate expression* to a political order and its social structures; its hierarchies of individuals and groups mapped onto the space-time continuum of the artifice of the state. A world in which what is materially fabricated *properly* evokes some 'true' or 'natural' Order or *cosmos*, promoted (by those in power of course) as 'truly' constituting that world. A political order that would ideally express, embody, re-present, and promote an ideal unity, purity, and homogeneity of purpose (commonly projected as having been lost or even stolen: a lost homeland or a lost heritage, etc.); one that *embodies* individual and collective yearning for such aesthetically ideal worlds.

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(ill. 8) Plato was very clear that by its very nature, art itself fundamentally problematizes or troubles the distinction between fact and fiction, precisely by calling attention to the social or cultural constructedness of what is intended to be understood as factual or fictional. He believed that it was necessary to an ideal state that its laws and forms be accepted as *truly real* and securely *grounded* in an *immaterial* or spiritual or sacred order. In other words as if such an order *really were natural*, rather than being an aesthetic, political, cultural, or philosophical *hypothesis*. In other words, in effect, its artistry or artifice must literally be *amnesiac*: erasing the evidence of its own fabricatedness; its own ficticity. It must be *seen* to be on the side of ‘fact’ rather than of ‘fiction’ (as historians claimed), on the side of a ‘true’ Nature (as scientists claimed), or on the side of independently-pre-existing gods, or spirits (as theologians claimed).^{iv} ‘Proper’ art must therefore *deny or mask its artistry and artifice* – the gesture underlying all theocratic or fundamentalist religions or spiritualities, erasing the traces of their own brushwork. An order where the law of the community *really was* the (actual) ‘word(s)’ of the god(s), as properly interpreted by those properly ordained to correctly interpret – namely, of course, those holding or desiring power.

So: again: what does all this talk of ancient philosophy have to do with our subject of museums here today?

In a fundamentally important way, the assumptions that I’ve just been discussing open up the even deeper historical and philosophical problem of the relation between what we customarily distinguish as ‘art’ and ‘religion.’

(ill. 9) The most enduring problem confronting anyone who attempts to understand the institution of the museum and its history in its many different social, cultural, national, and global contexts is, as I said at the beginning, the problem of *representation*. A good example of this is the recent controversy that began in Denmark in 2005 over cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* of the Muslim prophet Mohammed. I was lecturing in Denmark in 2006 and had the occasion to speak about the controversy at universities in Copenhagen and Aarhus.^v I won’t discuss that controversy in detail except to suggest that, on the basis of my discussions with colleagues in Denmark and elsewhere since then, there have been basic and serious misunderstandings on all sides about what exactly the nature of the controversy was, and why each of the two major sides in the controversy were not talking about the same subject.

(ill.10) The controversy was more directly about the nature of representation itself, and only secondarily about issues of racism or freedom of expression which the media still may claim are the basic issues at stake. But to clearly understand the problem, and what any of this has to do with museums, we need to understand exactly *why* it was considered ‘blasphemous’ (by some fundamentalist factions within the Muslim community) for the prophet Mohammed to be visually represented – not simply represented in a negative, racist manner (which he clearly was), but *represented at all*. There was (and still is) a widespread failure in the non-Muslim community to understand the *logic* of why it would be ‘blasphemous’ to visually depict the prophet, and why the issue of freedom of expression, promoted by the mass media, missed what was more fundamentally at stake. The controversy signaled a certain amnesia about the long history of philosophical and religious thought in the West and in Christianity itself, and its own ambivalences over the nature and effects of art and representation, which in fact closely mirror debates in all three major monotheist religions.

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(ill. 11) But the answer is already clear if we recall the dilemma that Plato faced about the importance of banishing artistic representation from his ideal city: once something is made, it allows for the possibility of imagining *other* interpretations than those that may be intended by those producing objects and images – which is why interpretations must be controlled – controlled by authorities that claim to know the ‘real’ truth about what things mean; about how to properly read a representation or an image or an object or an exhibition, etc. If you represent a certain person, like Mohammed (or Christ, or Moses) you make it possible for some to imagine that the person could have looked differently. This was precisely the same problem encountered in early Christianity, and especially clearly in Byzantium in the 9th century about iconic images of Christ. The *iconoclasts* said that *any* representation of the god would lead to false understandings, so it was best avoided; no images of god should be allowed. The opposite political and religious belief, that of the *iconophiles*, believed that by making concrete an image of god, this made it possible for audiences to use their imaginations for positive means in appreciating the absolute immateriality of the divine power.

This again echoes the dilemma that Plato himself faced about whether or not to banish art from his ideal society, and it is a dilemma that every autocratic or monotheist religion has struggled with, and never resolved, because of the essential ambiguity of art and artistry itself. Because of the impossibility of completely controlling the reading and interpretation of things. All of which leads to the idea that *there is a fundamental ambiguity about any kind of representation* – whether visual or verbal – which concerns the nature of communication as such; the nature of signification. This is the linguistic or semiotic principle of the essential *arbitrariness* of signs.

So- How does all this help us understand museums and their aims, functions, and possible organizations?

(ill. 12) All social institutions exist as instruments to *manage ambiguity*, and museums are one of the most important such institutions in modernity. As optical, spatial devices to control historical materials by staging them as elements in historical narratives, with beginnings, middles, and ends – in other words, as stories with plots; as chronologies – they enlist the physical person of the visitor to unlock or reveal their messages or meanings. Every archive or museum depends for its significance on the presence (actual or virtual) of individuals or groups inhabiting or visiting the institution, who function as the operators of its machinery. At the most basic level, social institutions work to manage the ambivalence and ambiguity of signification; to manage the essential arbitrariness of signification. Even the ‘friendly alien’ we are presently sitting within manages ambiguity by self-consciously calling attention to the constructedness of all that surrounds it – both the old 19th century cast-iron façade around which this new construction is wrapped, but the entire fabric of Graz itself as a city. Cook & Fournier’s “Friendly Alien” works in ways similar to the way imaginary worlds, or heterotopias such as Disneyland call attention to the artificiality of the environment surrounding them; the constructedness; the artifice, the alien-ness of all that is familiar in the made environment.

It sounds very simple and perhaps may be very obvious, and of course in a sense it really is. But this is a fundamental point that we often lose sight of in thinking about museums and social institutions more generally. The problem of the museum is the problem of *art itself* in the most basic sense; the problem – the dilemma, in fact – of representation. Which means that we cannot adequately understand the museum separately from the problem of art itself, and also, as I’ve suggested, we cannot understand the problem of art separately from the problem of religion.

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(ill. 13) The media controversies over the Danish Mohammed cartoons completely misunderstood this very fundamental point; a point very clearly understood by Plato and by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam over many centuries about how deeply dangerous and threatening art is. Indeed, many religions, as institutions designed to manage the ambiguities of art and of human perception, deal most essentially and directly with this problem – the paradoxical nature of representation. And it was this same debate over representation that provoked the philosophical and political schism within European Christianity in the 15th century which led to the oppositions between Catholicism and Protestantism, which can be summarized in opposing attitudes toward the nature of the *eucharist*. This was a debate over the nature of representation: was the eucharist a *sign* (or *symbol* or *representation*) of the body of Christ, as the Protestants believed, or did the consecrated bread actually *become* the body of Christ during the moment when the priest said the words '*hoc est corpus meum*' – as the Catholics believed?

At issue here is the nature not only of art but equally the nature of religion. What the controversies I've mentioned actually point to is that there is an even more fundamental distinction than that between art and something 'external' to it, whether politics, science, history, commerce, or religion. Rather, the opposition or distinction is internal; *within artistry itself*; that is, between two paradigms of meaningfulness; between two antithetical construals of the idea of art. We might call one *eucharistic* – being essentially idolatry or fetishism, namely, a literalization of representation, (the Protestants believed that the Catholics were idolaters, and the Catholics believed that the Protestants didn't understand the complex nature of representation) – and the other, which I'll call the *semiotic*, is its anti-essentialist antithesis, namely, the foregrounding of the contingency and arbitrariness (the mediatedness or temporality) of all human fabrication or artifice (the Catholics believed that within a mortal universe made up of arbitrary signs and symbols, there was one sign that was *not* arbitrary, and thus not a sign – the eucharist).

(ill. 14) This implies further that what we call religion is the reification of one antithetical pole of artistry (the eucharistic), and what we call 'art' in modernity is the *opposite* reification – the idolatry or fetishization of signs, reducing art to a *kind* of object rather than a way of using many kinds of different objects.^{vi}

I've called my paper 'Notes for a Philosophy of the Museum' and I've tried to indicate where such a philosophy or theory should be located, and where it should be developed – *precisely at the intersection or juxtaposition between what we distinguish as art and religion*. This is a problem that goes far beyond our usual historical, philosophical, and political discussions and debates about museums and related modern social institutions and their missions and functions and histories and possible futures. But if we begin with the premise that museums are not simply 'representational artifacts', but are instruments designed to manage ambiguity and ambivalence, then it would be logical to begin by trying to understand exactly what the nature of that ambivalence might be. It concerns the ambivalence and ambiguity of a particular relationship – between what we distinguish as art and religion – which, as I've been implying throughout my talk, is a false distinction or opposition.

(ill. 15) *If we are to develop an effective theory or philosophy of the museum and of museology, then it must be based upon an investigation of the problematic relationships between art and religion*. In other words, it must investigate what the Enlightenment has banished or marginalized from social

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discourse; precisely what it was that the invention of 'aesthetics' in the 18th century has obscured about the connections between art and religion.

There was a fundamental lesson that emerged from the Danish cartoon controversy, which we need to understand very clearly, since it concerns the question of *exactly why* art was (and still is) dangerous to religious belief. What was revealed in the controversy over representations of the prophet Mohammed was very close to what was revealed by the iconoclasm controversy in early Christianity, which historically had its roots in problems examined a thousand years earlier in Greece by Plato. I've tried to summarize this here in trying to understand why Plato believed that art threatened society. This is also one of the profound philosophical lessons of places such as *Kunsthaus Graz*.

(ill. 16) Plato's dilemma over art and representation is very much our own dilemma today. The Enlightenment invention of aesthetics - and its progeny such as art history and museology - has obscured rather than solved this dilemma. So there is no final, single conclusion to my 'notes' this evening on the problem of the museum in any formal or traditional sense. Instead we are faced with an opening - a challenge to clarify the assumptions underlying all our customary discussions and debates about art and museums. And our assumptions about what is essentially connected to these debates, the problem of religion. My paper was intended to be a call for an investigation into the nature of artifice itself and its essential ambiguities. How we view those ambiguities indicates that art and religion are not different or distinct phenomena, but different sides of the same challenge of human art; different answers to the same question of human artistry in the face of the problem of society itself. An enduring problem as old as Plato and the Byzantine iconoclasts, and as recent as the Mohammed cartoon controversy. It is a problem that points up the precise distinctions between democracy and theocracy (or autocracy).

(ill. 17) This was precisely the problem or 'dilemma' that Plato pointed to that was threatening to an ideal or utopian social or political order, the problem that underlies some of the most recent debates about art and religion. Art problematizes the distinctions between fact and fiction that are preserved in the idea of utopia, but it also problematizes ideas about religion as something distinct from art. In the final analysis, it may be that religion is the art of amnesia, and art is the remembrance of religion's artistry. But of course, having said this, we are now very seriously challenged to fundamentally re-define these terms themselves, and to re-think the idea of art itself. The problem of the museum is inseparable in all of its aspects from some of the most profound and most ancient problems of philosophy itself. Our task today must be to use museums and museology as instruments to articulate and critically address such problems.

(ill. 18) You probably might not have previously imagined how Kunsthaus Graz and the Mohammed cartoon controversy, and the 16th century debates between Catholics and Protestants over the problem of the eucharist might be connected; but I'd like to suggest that they are, and I'd like to congratulate both the architects of this building, and the people of Graz for supporting this Blue Bubble of Philosophy, for helping all of us to begin to understand some very profound and very ancient yet very enduring questions about art, religion, representation, and museology.

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ⁱ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953), esp. 1: 243-45 and 2: 464-465. Much of the bulk of the discussion is carried out in book 6, esp. at the end, with the consideration of the contrast between the intelligible and the visible (511 ff).

ⁱⁱ With regard to history, see Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation,' in White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978): 121-134.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heidegger, 'The Origins of the Work of Art,' in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (London: Harper & Row, 1971 [Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, Einführung von Hans-Georg Gadamer, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1960, 1967]); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power as Art*, trans. D. F. Krell (London: Routledge 1981).

^{iv} As in the conviction that an ordered system of a world being described – for example the cosmological order in Thomas Aquinas – actually is that world rather than a hypothetical approximation, like any articulation. This is artifice as *adequation* – an imputed or virtual likeness – rather than as *equation* or identity. On the semiotic structure of this and related categories, see D. Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis & London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003) esp. Ch 8, 'The Limits of Representation,' pp. 137-151. On museums, see also Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi, eds. & contribs, *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum* (Ashgate, 2004).

^v D. Preziosi, "Enchanted Credulities: Art, Religion and Amnesia," the keynote lecture for *Gudlos! En konference om moderne religionskritik*, University of Copenhagen, 29 January 2007.

^{vi} These issues are discussed at some length in my *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity. The 2001 Slade Lectures in the Fine Arts, Oxford University* (Minneapolis and London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), and, in terms of the semiotic issues involved, in my *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991). The subject of the problematic relationships between art and religion is taken up in a forthcoming book, *Enchanted Credulities: Art, Religion, and Amnesia*.