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ABCEUM, which included work Mailroom, at Brighton Photo Biennial

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ABCEUM

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ESSAY

Abceum (Museum on Demand)

Today, the museum is made from what was once its marginalia. Comprised mainly of spaces that are not the galleries themselves, it has inflated its operations and stretched its parameters, respondent to social and economic pressures alike. In the 24/7 culture of presentness, it has become a museum on demand – a non-stop institution, with culture on tap. It has extended its operations, not as some post-structuralist performance of undoing of the white cube, but rather because those notionally peripheral operations, those added extras, are the site of customised service, transmission and knowledge production: they are a site of mass intellectuality where the museum connects to and participates in the domineering logic of the network and the new spirit of Capitalism. Total knowledge is unthinkable but sought after endlessly. The museum on demand supplies a labour that cannot, does not, stop.

So are galleries not now the edges, the periphery? Does the museum not fill its schedules with events and workshops every week, producing more hours of content than any artwork is visible for? Does it not panic to be seen to be busy, to be accessed, walked into and over? Is it not providing services as content, entertainment as culture? Has it not catalogued every available option for us, so that we can watch back each talk on cue, colour in our own masterpieces, and print our chosen posters as we want them, when we want them? The museum is a factory, to be sure: it is a factory specializing in an atomising cult of the personalised: allowing us to send personal messages from built in museum webcams makes this clear.

It is important to consider alternative and collective models of the museum. Now that the regular institution has returned to the condition of a pre-copernican entity, revolving around the atomised participant, it is left to a renewed idea of collectivity - which has occasionally been called a commonwealth – to re-orient and anchor us in a critical relationship to the past, present and imagined future.

There are two types of self-made institution. One is grandiose, grandstanding and delusional: it aspires to some kind of greatness that comes about only by historical privilege and right, or otherwise by sheer capital. It is the result of networking, incessant chatter, and bought in credibility. Its benefactor's name is above the door. Aspiring to imitate a high-minded seriousness, it delegates its decision making to the trend-setting and those who can wash their hands of the many familiar ethical contradictions that their resources are tethered to. The other, by contrast, can begin on a shoestring: it starts with a proposition, some posturing, and a little provocation. It might sometimes barely resemble a museum at all, just carry its name as a sign. It might take on its structural logic, and rapidly anoint itself, come out of the blue. It might also have a figurehead: a Marcel Broodthaers, with his obsessions for exotic plants, packing crates and eagles; a King Ubu or Rufus T. Firefly, getting on with the busy job of being full of power and force, silly

ceremony and public testament. It employs multiple Jane Castletons to give public tours. Where it assumes the logics of the mighty institution it does so parodically – it knows that comedy is a Trojan horse. It will imitate the foibles and epic distortions that are enacted upon edifices where ‘neutrality’ and ‘historic narration’ have long been considered values, but it will also, in turn, propose alternatives, and new possibilities. And it will do so through collectivity and cooperation.

The possibility of the museum on demand is only beginning to be explored through a return to collectivity. Cooperation is no longer geographically determined: it may function remotely, and use its span as a strength. It need not be immediately materialized, but exist in discourse, and be composed of fragments. It is dispersed but communicative, it exists in multiple formats.

The Abceum feels the shift from (mass) production to (mass) customization through the significance of print and production on demand. It reconsiders the museum, just as it re-orientes the scales of production away from the twin poles of the scarce and the many. The Abceum has co-opted the marginal spaces of the institution, to turn them in on themselves. It chooses the major and the minor, the tangible and the virtual. Each book is a space, investigating what the museum has become. They are imagined and imaginary sites of production, reception, and cooperation.

Duncan Wooldridge, 2014

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