

The Museum of Mental Objects: Another cog in the status machinery?

By Matt Price

The Museum did not open today. No public were admitted; no staff entered the museum. It was neither a holiday nor a strike. It just didn't open. It didn't need to open today. Its services and facilities were simply not required. But revenue funding will not be called into question, the director will not be hauled up in front of the authorities, there will be no letters of complaint. The Museum is not in financial difficulty; in fact, it is probably in a very healthy financial situation in comparison with many other museums. There are no debts or loans, no bills outstanding. The museum does not need to worry about ticket sales or the net income of the semi-franchised cafeteria; it doesn't matter one iota whether the shop made a single sale. No partnerships have been forged with funding bodies, no agencies called today; no following up of potential donors, sponsors, or chasing of bequeaths. No deals have been struck with corporate clients; there have been no membership enquiries and the Society of Friends has not so much as sent an email. And yet it has a regular acquisitions policy. Admittedly its collection is small, but it is restricted by neither money nor space. The museum does not need planning permission to expand; no contractors are called in for extensions or maintenance; there is no security system. While the museum is at risk, it has no insurance scheme, no sprinkler system or digital humidifier. There are no fire escapes, there are no ramps or lifts for disabled access (though disabled visitors have full access to the collection); there are no toilets, no cloakrooms, no areas for schools' workshops. And yet the audience is as valued by the museum as the artists whose work is exhibited there.

The Museum didn't open yesterday either. Indeed, its opening times are entirely sporadic: sometimes it opens at 10.00 in the morning; at other times at midday, sometimes at 8.00 at night. But paradoxically, rather than frustrate or anger visitors, it often bends to suit their needs. It has in-built flexibility, responding proactively and with sensitivity to the changing habits and routines of the gallery-going public. The Museum will occasionally open after midnight and stay open until sunrise, or open at sunrise and close soon after. It has opened for just one viewer. It closed as soon as they left. There are no timetables, no departmental managers, no conservation specialists, no team of invigilators, technicians, accountants or cleaning staff. And yet it runs smoothly, efficiently and is a fine example of best practice, value for money and socially and culturally diverse audience accessibility. It regularly monitors and assesses the responses of the viewers in order to improve its services, hoping that each visitor will leave with an enriched outlook on the world, but isn't very bothered if they had a miserable, thoroughly unproductive experience. Conversely, the museum responds very well to the comments and criticisms of each viewer, treating each one with equal importance. The museum enjoys encouragement and enthusiasm, but doesn't tend to publish or quote in annual reports. Perhaps because it has no annual reports, no end of year tax returns, no board to give a presentation to. The Museum is accountable neither to city council, regional arts board, quango (quasi autonomous non-governmental organisation) nor governmental body. No private benefactors or vested commercial interests occupy the time of this museum. And yet they are all welcome to visit. The Museum is open to everyone and anyone, but retains the right to refuse access to anybody at any time.

The Museum of Mental Objects is, as its title suggests, a museum devoted to works of art that exist only as concepts as expressed through the spoken word. It is an oral and aural museum. It is a performative museum that was initiated by artist Judy Freya Sibayan, and opened shortly after the completion of one of her previous projects, Scapular Gallery Nomad, an art gallery that rested on Sibayan's shoulders from 1994 – 2002 (See Make, Special Edition 92, 2002). The Museum of Mental Objects (MoMO) functions by Sibayan inviting an artist to conceive a work of art that is passed on to the museum only by word of mouth. As a new artist is invited, it is Sibayan's task to store each accepted

work in her memory. When anyone wishes to visit the collection (supposing she is willing), Sibayan will share the works in her collection with them, requesting only that they be so kind as to not write down, record or in anyway document the works of art. Sometimes Sibayan will formally present the collection at a conference, in a seminar or at an event, but on other occasions it is shared informally, in a house or bar, on a train or in the street. For Scapular Gallery Nomad, Sibayan wore a gallery; this time she has become the museum.

The Museum's physical structure is, therefore, entirely biological and the only place it can be accessed is in the neurological networks of the brain. With axons as corridors and postsynaptic neurons as galleries, the work of art comes into existence through nerve impulses from presynaptic neurons being passed into the receptor sites (gallery walls) of postsynaptic neurons via a very helpful team of installation staff known as neurotransmitters. Thus the Museum is very similar in form to the way in which each work of art was conceived and the way in which it is consumed: creation, presentation and reception are located in the mind without the intermediary of any man-made physical object. The museum's collection is communicated from person to person, wherever and whenever it is felt to be appropriate. That the works are passed on by word of mouth locates the works (or mental objects) firmly in the domain of conceptual art, but with a method historically considered more valued in certain non-Western forms of information communication – recounting orally. This process is not always an accurate retelling of each work, though this is not necessarily a problem: the narrator may get better at communicating the work each time it is recounted, as well as dilute, forget or misquote. The work might change each time it is told, not unlike the party game Chinese Whispers, becoming exaggerated or distorted as time goes on, though Sibayan may try to be as faithful to the artist's original intent as possible.

Perhaps as a curatorial challenge (albeit a generous one), Sibayan invited me to discuss, develop and work on MoMO with her, as a fellow curator and museum. After two years of regular email, postal and telephone communication together about the project, she inaugurated MoMO at a conference in Manila titled "Locus: Interventions in Art Practices," and the same week, I inaugurated MoMO during a lecture to undergraduates at the University of Central England. Instinctively, I called the museum MoMO Birmingham, branding it as if it were a branch of the Guggenheim or Tate. Sibayan seemed a little surprised that I had done so, and when she asked why, I suggested that I would probably call it wherever I was standing at the time – MoMO Glasgow or MoMO Johannesburg or wherever. So the question as to whether there is one branch of MoMO or site-specific versions emerged as an issue early on. The ambiguity is not uncomfortable for the time being, and that is very symptomatic of the way in which the project is evolving – it is a project in progress. In conversation with some students, the question as to whether they could also open their own MoMOs came up. This also remains unresolved, and it is in the process of running the museum that such issues are raised and answered. It might be great if everyone were to have their own mental museum. Other practical questions might be things such as what to do if you forget a work in the collection – do you go back and ask the artist again? Can people recount your collection to someone else, or does the process always have to be from museum to visitor? Without reproduction of works of art or any mechanism for its free circulation, does this make MoMO a totalitarian kind of organisation?

One of the key issues that MoMO raises concerns the art object as commodity and its relationship to the machinery of the contemporary art world. Not being tangible, physical objects suggests that the works of art in the collection cannot enter the arts economy. While it is uncommon for artworks that exist purely as ideas to be sold, it is certainly not impossible, so it is interesting to consider what MoMO would do if another museum or collector asked to purchase a work or the entire collection. If MoMO were to refuse a sale, would this be unfair to the artist, who has given a work for free to the museum? A sale might mean that each artist could be paid to give a work to the museum, or that the curators could take a salary. What do the artists hope to accomplish and how are the visitors satisfied? How far, then, is MoMO a simulation of a museum, and how far can it actually assume the role of a museum?

The financial value of a work of art is naturally dependent on an often complex set of factors that are determined by museums, commercial galleries, dealers, curators, critics and markets. The question as to what any work of art is worth is ascertained from a form of consensus derived from these component parts and fluctuates to various degrees over time, location and context. While the quality of the work and the artist's practice as a whole is a crucial element, the artist's success is generally dictated by structures beyond their control, though some artists navigate these structures better than others. Without any fixed location, and without any political or financial obligations, MoMO is effectively a mischievous form of institutional critique that explores the forces within and around the museum: who decides which works are exhibited or purchased and what are the reasons for doing so? What are the criteria for selecting artists and works, and how are they determined and assessed? Where is the museum located, where does the money come from and who benefits from the sale? Another issue is the wealth of a museum, where it comes from and how it is sustained. When a commercial gallery, agent or dealer is involved, their contribution in the process is also an issue. What percentage of public money is spent on their services? Where are these commercial galleries and dealers based? The background of the artist is also of potential significance: where is the artist from, where do they live now, where were they trained, what was their route to this position? And to facilitate, support and speed up the process, what roles have the critics and journalists played in the process? What are the personal connections between all of the parties involved? How far is this machinery unfair or biased and how far is it well meaning, necessary and desirable? What changes could or should be made, and what should be kept as it is?

In comparison, MoMO's simple invitation to artists and the subsequent communication of their work to other people seems like a very open and transparent process, and one which puts the politics of display and the power structures behind them into sharp relief. But of course, MoMO cannot claim to be completely free of these issues. While it may (for the time being), by-pass the arts economy and avoid many of these issues and situations, MoMO is still implicated in the very structures it perhaps seeks to critique. Many of the questions from the previous paragraph also apply to MoMO. The main factor that links MoMO and more tangible museums is the issue of status. The prime mover behind power in the contemporary art world is the status hierarchy, and this is shared by artists, curators, critics, dealers, collectors and visitors alike, albeit in widely different forms. Status is the real currency of contemporary art and the arts economy is regulated by it. While MoMO has few of the concerns of many museums, it relies upon status for its dialogue with or critique of the institution. The artists still have access to status through MoMO and MoMO acquires its status through them. The channels and networks are also not so dissimilar as it might first appear – MoMO survives through art colleges and universities, galleries and museums, conferences and events, curators and writers, magazines and journals, as well as its informal people networks. And even if MoMO sticks to its guns concerning commercial activity, the more successful it becomes, the more 'art status' Sibayan, myself, the artists and anyone involved with the project achieves, and hence our general 'economic index' within the professional art arena goes up. As the issues surrounding MoMO unravel, the significance of whether the art objects exist physically or purely in the mind also seems to diminish. It just remains for me to wonder whether MoMO should be run anonymously and whether it should be involved with critical discourse in any way, shape or form, or whether it should simply live as a moment spent in conversation. And of course, I must decide whether to add my name to this text...

Matt Price is an independent curator and writer. He holds a Master of Arts in Curating from the Royal College of Art, London. He was visual arts editor of Fusedmagazine of the West Midlands, Managing Editor of Flashart International, Publications Manager of the Serpentine Gallery and Visiting Lecturer at University of Central England. He has worked on exhibitions, publications and projects in Birmingham, London, Paris, Glasgow and Milan.