People and Things: Questions Museums Make us Ask and Answer

ALDA RODRIGUES

Abstract
This chapter first analyzes two texts in the tradition of essays which associate museums with the notion of displacement: *Moral Considerations on the Destination of Works of Art*, by Quatremère de Quincy, and 'The Origin of the Work of Art', by Heidegger. Both authors claim that a work of art is not only a material object but also a centre of practices, values, beliefs, traditions, memories, and so on. I argue that, insofar as a work of art can be the centre of this type of network in a museum, the description of art these authors propose defeats their own claims against museums. In the second part, I suggest that Heidegger's and Quatremère's descriptions of the role of art can be articulated with the help of Donald Davidson's understanding of the interconnection between the material world and human concepts. As Davidson sees it, things and people can only be described in relation to the other particular persons, objects, events and places they are connected to. From this perspective, the subjective, the objective and the intersubjective cannot be grasped independently. Museums stage this interconnection and can, therefore, be regarded as philosophical instruments that may help us describe things and, by extension, also ourselves.

1. Introduction

There is an important tradition of texts linking museums to the notions of decontextualization, uprootedness and exile. This textual tradition itself exists for historical reasons. Some of the first public museums, such as the Louvre or the British Museum, gathered and displayed objects that had been spoils of war and, as such, had been taken by force from their original owners and contexts. At the same time, however, the importance of the role of museums in the preservation of cultural objects has been widely acknowledged. In a world without museums, needless to say, the most important works of art would be lost or inaccessible to most of us. In a time when financing museum becomes increasingly difficult to the point of threatening their survival, their importance must be defended.

doi:10.1017/S135824611600014X

2. Quatremère and Heidegger on the Role of Art

Antoine-Chrysotome Quatremère de Quincy's (1755–1849) *Moral Considerations on the Destination of Works of Art* was one of the inaugural texts in the tradition which associates museums with decontextualization.[1] Here, Quatremère complains not only against the deracination of objects in museums and collections but also against the loss of meaning this entails. According to Quatremère, the value of works of art is intimately related to the context in which they are originally integrated. Uprooting them from this context represents a loss of meaning. As he sees it, when the works of art are integrated in a collection or a museum, the public loses sight of the reasons and causes of the creation of works of art, of the connections they established, of their affectional value and of a multiplicity of moral ideals and intellectual harmonies people could connect with while viewing them in their original space.[2]

Not everything Quatremère de Quincy wrote, however, can be seen as part of this tradition against museums. In his letters to the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova on the subject of his visit to the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum, Quatremère expresses a different opinion.[3] He recognized that, in the museum, this collection

[1] Antoine-Chrysotome Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations Morales sur la Destination des Ouvrages d'Art* (Paris: L'Imprimerie de Crapelet, 1815). Since there is no available English version of this essay, every translation is mine. Another example is the famous essay 'The Problem of Museums' (1923), by Paul Valéry, a text which, even though it was written a century later, recovers the most important points of the first essay, suggesting that museum-goers were still as uncomfortable in the museological space as the first museum visitors.

[2] '*Le public perd de vue, au milieu de ces collections, les causes qui firent naître les ouvrages, les rapports auxquels ils étaient soumis, les affections avec lesquelles ils demanderaient à être considerés, et cette multitude d'idées morales, d'harmonies intellectuelles qui leur donnaient tant de moyens divers d'agir sur notre âme*'. Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations Morales sur la Destination des Ouvrages d'Art*, op. cit., 50.

[3] Antoine-Chrysotome Quatremère de Quincy, *Letters to Miranda and Canova on the Abduction of Antiquities from Rome and Athens,* translated by Chris Miller and David Gilks (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2012). The letters were first published in 1818. Note that the display of the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum that Quatremère de Quincy refers to is different from the current one in the Duveen Gallery. The Duveen Gallery was inaugurated in 1962. Quatremère visited the Parthenon Marbles in 1818, when the pieces were in a temporary room at the old British Museum in Montague House. At that time the Marbles

'produced a sense of astonishment greater than was ever produced by the sight of the monument in its finished and complete state'.[4]

In what follows I explore the question of how somebody who seemed to be an adversary of museums changed his opinion in the face of one of the most controversial collections of all time. This is especially puzzling given that the primary cause of controversy was the fact that the Marbles are fragments of the Parthenon. How can it be that somebody who seems to be against museums and collections because they allegedly show decontextualized objects manages to see the advantages of this particular collection being housed in a museum?[5]

In *Moral Considerations*, Quatremère's true goal is not the rejection of collections and museums *per se*, but the defence of the importance of the interconnection of artworks and their original context. We need to keep in mind the historical context in which Quatremère was writing in order to understand his intentions properly. Quatremère was writing specifically against expropriations of objects for museum collections in the context of both the French Revolution and the foundation of the Louvre as a public-access museum. At this time, the property of the clergy and aristocracy was annexed by the state or sold to French or foreign collectors. In this context, the exhibition of these objects in the Louvre was construed as an 'aesthetic liberation'.[6] Disconnecting these objects from their original aristocratic or religious contexts was described as a revelation of their full aesthetic value. Quatremère was declaring his opposition to this view, which

---

shared that space with other antiquities from different origins, such as the caryatid from the porch of the Erechtheion. No effort was made to recapture the original placement of the sculptures of the Parthenon. These weren't even isolated from the rest of the collection. This display aimed to provide a 'picturesque' arrangement and an inspiring atmosphere for artists to draw. Before the construction of the Duveen Gallery, the Parthenon Marbles were displayed in several different arrangements, according to the various understandings of the museum's role in presenting them.

[4] Ibid., 137.

[5] For more information about the history of the Parthenon and the controversy surrounding the Parthenon Marbles, see: William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Mary Beard, *The Parthenon* (London: Profile Books, 2010); and Christopher Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles: The Case for Reunification* (London and New York: Verso, 2008).

[6] Jean-Louis Déotte, *Oubliez! Les Ruines, l'Europe, le Musée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).

he regarded as ideological whitewashing. As he saw it, the artistic value of an object couldn't simply be disconnected from information about its history. Since the historical context affects the meaning of an artwork, trying to erase information about its historical origin was tantamount to deliberately destroying an important part of its identity, and could not be condoned. Hence it would be too simplistic to read *Moral Considerations* as a diatribe against museums. In fact, it was written against a specific practice that was historically determined by the context following the French Revolution.

It is also necessary to note that Quatremère was well aware of the importance of the collections and museums in the knowledge, appreciation and creation of art. In his letters to General Francisco de Miranda, he explores the concepts of 'collection' and 'museum', both through the description of Rome as an archetype of museums and collections, and by highlighting the importance of the practices a collection may ground.[7] He writes:

> Rome in itself is an entire world to explore, a sort of *mappa mundi* in relief in which one can find Egypt and Asia, Greece and the Roman empire, and the ancient and modern worlds in epitome; … to have seen Rome is to have made numerous voyages in one.[8]

Quatremère's description of Rome would work as an advertisement for the Louvre or the British Museum, even though Quatremère is arguing against the delocalization of pieces from Rome to institutions like these. Like Rome, these museums integrate pieces from around the world, from several historical periods, and from different cultures; to see them all in their original contexts would indeed require numerous travels. Since some of their original contexts may not be available anymore, seeing them all would require travelling not only through space but also through time. Quatremère's comparison of Rome to a '*mappa mundi*' also suggests that he recognizes that museums allow for a panoramic mode of vision that is unavailable elsewhere. In these letters to Miranda it also becomes clear that, for Quatremère, knowledge, appreciation and the creation of art are relational processes interconnected with the establishment of a hierarchy

[7] Quatremère de Quincy, *Letters to Miranda and Canova on the Abduction of Antiquities from Rome and Athens*, op. cit., 117.
[8] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611600014X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of merit based on an informed comparison of pieces in a series. In this sense, the evaluation of a work of art requires a collection.[9]

This shows that Quatremère is aware of some of the advantages of bringing artworks together in the same space, an awareness that becomes even clearer in his letters to Canova. There he claims that in the British Museum the Parthenon Marbles have two main advantages: (i) better viewing conditions of individual pieces; and (ii) greater integration within, and impact upon, European cultural life and art criticism.

As far as viewing conditions are concerned, Quatremère claims that the Marbles can be better appreciated in the museum than on the original building because in the museum they are placed nearer the viewer than when on the building, where they were high up in the dark. In the British Museum, he wrote, 'we have before us the development of over two hundred feet of this frieze and can enjoy it no doubt even better than we could when it was in the Parthenon, where it was feebly lit and placed farther from the eye. … [O]ne can scan the full extent of it, reviewing each object in turn and comparing them for variety'.[10] He also notices that, whereas in the Parthenon the pieces lost some of their individual importance as parts of a larger whole:

> In a finished building, each sculptural object, seen in its place, loses some of its grandeur; considered together with everything that accompanies it, it can be examined only from one side and in one respect; the greater the harmony and proportion of the ensemble, the more the eye and mind tend to generalize and to integrate every part into the whole. One's grasp of the details, and with it one's sense of the length and difficulty of the work, simply vanish.[11]

In the collection the pieces can be seen individually, and in detail:

> Here [in the British Museum] by contrast … you have your hand on the objects, they appear before you in their real dimensions, you move around each of them, you can count the pieces and

[9] Quatremère notes that only if Raphael's works could be seen side by side, would they truly be known: 'These isolated pieces, detached from the series of which they form part, cannot have the same pedagogic quality that they had in their country of origin'. Ibid., 113. Ideally, this collection would include the entire work of an artist, so that artists could learn about the progress of artistic skill through the comparison between the several stages of an artist's work.

[10] Ibid., 129.

[11] Ibid., 137.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611600014X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> perceive their combinations in terms of relations and measurements.[12]

Greater integration for the Marbles in European cultural life, as Quatremère sees it, is made possible by easier access to the pieces in the British Museum, considering Greece's distance from the centre of European culture (at the time, travelling to Greece wasn't as easy as it is today). He pointed out that in the British Museum the Parthenon Marbles were much more accessible to the European public than they would have been in the Parthenon, therefore by being in the British Museum they have been able to exert greater influence on European cultural life.

Thus, the apparent contradiction between Quatremère's views in *Moral Considerations on the Destination of Works of Art* and in his published letters to Canova and Miranda disappears if we notice that, for him, the identity of works of art is established through their integration in public life. Coming to see that the presence of the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum was accompanied by a new cultural dynamic was decisive for Quatremère's acknowledgment of the advantages of this placement. Quatremère's notion of cultural heritage is surprisingly ample for his time, insofar as it includes not only objects but also cultural practices, affections, beliefs, actions and traditions. For this French essayist, the arts are the centre of opinions, ideas, memories, and noble actions and feelings.[13] Such is the importance Quatremére attributes to the integration of the arts into public life that he describes them as 'popular historians'.[14]

[12] Ibid.

[13] '[*les Arts*] *sont destinés à exciter d'heureuses idées, à rappeler de touchants souvenirs, à consacrer d'importants opinions, à perpétuer, à propager de nobles sentiments et de hautes affections, la societé et la philosophie en proclament l'utilité, en réclament le libre et public usage. Aux yeux du vrai philosophe, les Arts sont les historiens populaires d'un grand nombre de faits, d'opinions, de traditions, qui composent l'existence morale des nations*'. Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations Morales sur la Destination des Ouvrages d'Art*, op. cit., 55.

[14] Using Ancient Greece as a paradigm of harmonious life, Quatremère notes that in this period the arts were naturally connected to the needs of society insofar as every social, political and religious institutions was grounded on and consolidated by the arts: '*Dans les campagnes, dans les villes, dans les places, dans les maisons, dans les routes, tout vivait, tout respirait, tout pensait par la puissance de l'art …. Chaque pas offrait un monument, et chaque monument donnait une leçon, retraçait un souvenir, excitait un sentiment; c'est que chacun avait ses fondements dans les moeurs, les habitudes du lieu, l'histoire du pays, les traditions locales*'. Ibid., 80–81.

Quatremère's perception of the cultural and practical advantages of this museological context is articulated through the notion that these works of art are able to 'open their own space' in the museum. As we've seen, for him, one of the most decisive advantages of the British Museum is the fact that the objects appear before the viewers in their real dimensions and viewers can 'move around each of them', they can 'count the pieces and perceive their combinations in terms of relations and measurements'.[15] In other words, viewers locate themselves in relation to the pieces they're seeing; the Marbles acquire a physical presence which the viewer needs to integrate with their own physical presence, circulating around them or adopting a position in order to take them in.

Quatremère's notion of the organization of space around a work of art is surprisingly similar to the description Martin Heidegger proposes, in his essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1950), of the work of art 'opening up a world'.[16] The most interesting element in the coincidence is that, both for Heidegger and for Quatremère, spatial organization is equated with a conceptual and cultural dimension. Objective space is intimately connected with mental and cultural coordinates.

In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger not only deals with topics that are similar to those treated by Quatremère in *Moral Considerations on the Destination of Works of Art* and in his letters to Canova and Miranda but he also reaches comparable conclusions. In common between these two, otherwise very different thinkers, is a concern with the loss of meaning to which works of art are subject when they are treated simply as objects – whether of the art industry, criticism, art history, museums, or even of tradition and conservation. Both authors argue that the meaning and value of the work of art is interconnected with the context of causes, connections, affections, practices and traditions of which it is a part. For both, it is impossible adequately to describe the work of art without mentioning this network or, in Heideggerian vocabulary, its 'world'.

The notion of 'opening up a world' can be clarified by recourse to Heidegger's description of the 'work-being' of a Greek temple.[17] As

[15] Quatremère de Quincy, *Letters to Miranda and Canova on the Abduction of Antiquities from Rome and Athens*, op. cit., 137.

[16] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperPerennial, 2001), 15–86.

[17] '[E]ven the much-vaunted aesthetic experience cannot get around the thingly aspect of the art work. There is something stony in a work of architecture, wooden in a carving, colored in a painting, spoken in a linguistic work, sonorous in a musical composition.... [T]he work of art is something else over and above the thingly element'. Ibid., 19.

Heidegger sees it, by resting on the 'rocky ground', the temple locates and organizes the space around it: 'the storm raging above it', 'the luster and gleam of the stone', 'the invisible space of air', 'tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket'.[18] Heidegger declares: 'The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves'.[19] Heidegger here suggests something similar to Quatremère's point regarding the presence of the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum: the work-being of art is based on a material dimension and a spatial organization, but it goes beyond them in the sense that it becomes the centre of human life in a shared space. People form a concept of themselves in correlation with the temple and the world they share with it.

From the same essay, the famous passage, concerning the pair of peasant's shoes Van Gogh depicts in a painting, can also be used to develop the explanation of this notion of 'opening up a world':

> From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. … This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want.[20]

In this passage, every feature of the shoes is described as connected to an activity that is inseparable from the space it is acted on. Feelings and mental activity are inseparable from material features and physical events: tenacity and loneliness are present in the 'rugged heaviness of the shoes', in the 'slow trudge' of the peasant through the furrows of the field, as the dampness of soil is inseparable from the same features. There is no frontier between conceptual and material features. Concepts are implicated in the objects and events within the world.

From an art historian's point of view, Meyer Schapiro argues that the painting Heidegger writes about depicts the artist's own shoes

[18] Ibid., 41.
[19] Ibid., 42.
[20] Ibid., 33. Heidegger further remarks that, even though this description is suggested by Van Gogh's picture, it is through the peasant woman wearing her shoes in the field that the shoes are what they are, but 'perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes'. Ibid.

and not a pair of shoes worn by a peasant.[21] This point, however, hardly seems relevant to what is at stake in Heidegger's essay. Heidegger describes the painting as a viewer would see it, without any specific information about its origin. His focus is on the relation between the painting and any ordinary viewer in interaction with it, using his or her own assumptions, expectations and knowledge as they would if they stood before any other object in everyday life. This shows that the painting is able to 'open up its own world', independently of its artistic origin or the intention of its creator. For Heidegger, as for the non-art historian in general, this is more important than either the reference or the model of the painting in reality, or the external, biographical circumstances which led to the artist's production.

It is also possible to argue that, in his work, Van Gogh is well aware of the affinities between the artist working in the studio and the peasant in the field. In addition, Van Gogh's painting of shoes seems to be less about the shoes than about the activities of their owner. In keeping with this view, Heidegger's main goal is to focus on the interconnectedness of objects and people's actions as disclosed by art. Van Gogh's painting is just the trigger for this topic. Heidegger could even have used another painting in which an object evokes its owner's activities. For an art historian studying Van Gogh's work, the information Meyer Schapiro gives us about the genesis of the painting is very interesting. For Heidegger's main point, it is secondary.

In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger deals not only with art but also with the objects that are closest to people; the most useful of these objects he calls 'equipment', situating them between 'mere things' and 'works of art'.[22] The fact that he doesn't offer a clear-cut distinction between these three categories, which are described as much through their differences as through their similarities, seems to suggest that Heidegger is more interested in the complexity of the connections between these categories than in trying to forge artificial borders between them.[23] His interest in one of Van

[21] Meyer Schapiro, 'The Still-Life as a Personal Object: A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh', in Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).

[22] Heidegger gives the example of a block of granite to clarify what he means by a mere thing. See Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', op. cit., 22.

[23] 'A piece of equipment, a pair of shoes for instance, when finished, is also self-contained like the mere things, but it doesn't have the character of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611600014X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gogh's depictions of a pair of shoes, since it focuses on a piece of equipment in art, further complicates the task of someone looking for a clear distinction between 'equipment', 'thing' and 'work of art'. Nevertheless, in the passages concerning Van Gogh's peasant's shoes, it seems clear that, for Heidegger, art brings out the materiality of daily life – the thingliness of things – instead of being detached from this practical dimension. Art shows us the world we inhabit.

So far I have argued that, insofar as a work of art can be the centre of a complex network of connections in a museum, the description of art proposed by both Quatremère and Heidegger defeats their own claims against museums. In the second part, I suggest that Heidegger's and Quatremère's descriptions of the role of art can be articulated with the help of Donald Davidson's understanding of the interconnection between the material world and human concepts.

3. On the Connection between Art and People

Jeff Malpas notes that attention to the spatial dimensions both of the material world and of human existence, allied to a rejection of the subject versus object paradigm, suggests a connection between Heidegger's work and the philosophy of Donald Davidson.[24] Davidson is well known for his broad reflection on human meaning and its connections to objective space.

In 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', Davidson argues that the objective and the intersubjective constitute the context in which subjectivity takes form.[25] He writes: 'it is only when an observer consciously correlates the responses of another creature with objects and events in the observer's world that there is any basis for saying

---

having taken shape by itself, like the granite boulder. On the other hand, equipment displays an affinity with the artwork insofar as it is something produced by the human hand. However, by its self-sufficient presence the work of art is similar rather to the mere thing which has taken shape by itself and is self-contained.... [T]hus the piece of equipment is half thing, because characterized by thingliness, and yet it is something more: at the same time it is half art work and yet something less, because lacking the self-sufficiency of the art work.' Ibid., 28.

[24] Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 138–156.

[25] Donald Davidson, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed), *A.J. Ayer Memorial Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 153–166; see especially 165.

the creature is responding to those objects or events'.[26] According to Davidson, human understanding develops through dialogue with other people and through the involvement of people with non-human entities in the world. Access to the world, to others and to ourselves is constituted through this interaction. In other words, human understanding is based on a public, intersubjective sphere grounded on a shared material dimension.

Davidson's description of the connections between people and what's around them complements Quatremère de Quincy's and Heidegger's theorizing of the relation between works of art and people. Bringing these three authors together, we can say that, as a part of the world, works of art and the practices organized around them are an important element of who people are, just as people are an important element in the being of a work of art.[27]

The dynamics between the objective, subjective and intersubjective dimensions Davidson describes highlights the importance of the public and shared dimension not only for art but also in people's lives. It suggests that the identity of people and things is interdependent, since we understand who we are at the same time as we understand other people and other things, and the positions they occupy in the space we all share.[28] We cannot talk about ourselves without referring to the things and people we share the same material and conceptual space with.

Quatremère and Heidegger agree that works of art (and, as far as Davidson is concerned, also other things in the world) are neither pre-given concepts nor simple material objects. They include, define, and are themselves dynamically defined by the connections and practices they condition in the space they occupy. Hence, their identity must be articulated through a variety of particular happenings, relationships and actions, and worked out through their history. It cannot be grasped independently of a consideration of the relations that constitute them, their concrete particularities and involvements in different times and spaces. Only in relation to the particular persons, objects, events and places they are connected with can they be correctly described.

[26] Ibid., 159.

[27] Davidson describes works of art as objects: 'Works of art, writings, artifacts of all sorts are among the objects in the world'. Donald Davidson, 'The Third Man', *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1995), 607–615.

[28] This is the same thing Heidegger suggests when he says that '[the temple gives] men their outlook on themselves'. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', op. cit., 42.

In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger also explores the concept 'preservation', noting that it isn't necessarily associated with the work's permanence in its original site. Using the example of a temple in Paestum, Heidegger remarks that even when the work of art is not displaced to a collection or a museum, it can lose value and meaning if it is treated as a mere object of conservation and tradition and is no longer a dynamic element in the world:

> World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It's they themselves, to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by. As bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation.[29]

As a tourist attraction, the temple in Paestum, according to Heidegger, is no longer able to set up its own world. Instead, it is treated as a mere prop in a world which subjects it to alien imperatives.

As far as preservation is concerned, Heidegger remarks: '[t]he proper way to preserve the work is cocreated and prescribed only and exclusively by the work.... When works are offered for merely artistic enjoyment, this doesn't yet prove that they stand in preservation as works'.[30] He adds that '[t]he work's own peculiar reality ... is brought to bear only where the work is preserved in the truth that happens in the work itself'.[31] Finally, he observes: 'Preserving the work doesn't reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work'.[32] In other words, only if the work imposes its own organization – only if it opens its own world – in the space that it occupies can we speak of preservation, according to Heidegger. Both for Heidegger and for Quatremère, works of art are inseparable from this public dynamic integration and the interactions they organize.

This notion of preservation is not incompatible with the presence of works of art in museums, as Quatremère himself recognizes in his letters to Canova and Miranda. According to Heidegger, art can only be art, and not merely an object, when it opens up a world in the way illustrated by the peasant's shoes in Van Gogh's painting or a temple in Greece. This 'opening up' or 'setting up' of a world works as a disclosure of possible interconnections between the objective and the conceptual features that are at stake in that space. Both

[29] Ibid., 40.
[30] Ibid., 66.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611600014X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Quatremère's and Heidegger's objections to museums and collections can only persist if in these contexts the work of art is treated as an object, and not as the focal point of its own world. In the case of the Parthenon Marbles, seeing that these pieces had become the focus of new cultural practices, Quatremère accepts the advantages of museological space.

The difference between the temple in Paestum, as seen by Heidegger, and the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum, as described by Quatremère, is that, even though the first remained in its original site, it was no longer able to disclose itself and other people and things in new ways, whereas the Parthenon Marbles were actively influencing and inspiring new artistic and cultural practices, and distinguishing themselves as dynamic elements both in European identity and in the identity of the museum in which they were displayed.

This line of reasoning tends to weaken the position of those who argue for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. Even if the Parthenon Marbles were returned to Greece, for conservation reasons, they would still be displayed in a museum (the New Acropolis Museum) and not in their precise original location. Displaying them in a museum was considered the best solution to ensure their preservation in Greece. This option suggests an acknowledgment of the value of museums as institutions which both guarantee the preservation of works of art and provide an important space for cultural contextualization based on the interconnections of objects.

To claim that Greece is the only appropriate context for the Marbles doesn't seem right when these pieces acquired new meanings and triggered new practices in the British Museum. Circumscribing the meaning and the value of a work of art either to history or to its original material context seems to suggest that this work simply reproduces the distinctive traits of its original space and time. The simple fact that these pieces are integrated and visited in a geographically distant museum contradicts this. In the British Museum the Parthenon Marbles share the space with some of the most iconic and important objects in human history. This context highlights their role in universal history, while also establishing a common ground between people of different times, places, and cultures, in spite of all the differences that separate them. In contrast, the context of the New Acropolis Museum would emphasize the cultural and historical specificity of the Parthenon Marbles. There is an interchange of values and meanings between the Parthenon and the British Museum. It has even been argued that the controversy

around the Parthenon Marbles has kept the Parthenon on top of the European cultural agenda, thus adding to its importance.[33]

This line of reasoning also reminds us that, when describing and understanding both the Parthenon and the Parthenon Marbles, we need to consider all the episodes in their existence. Since it was built, the Parthenon was used not only as a temple, but also as a Christian church, a mosque, an arms depot, and, after an explosion that almost converted it into a ruin, as a source both of building materials for other buildings and of memorabilia for all sorts of collectors. The history of the Parthenon is not complete without mentioning Lord Elgin and the British Museum. All these episodes, conversions and different uses help us understand the importance of the Parthenon. Describing it only as a temple and a symbol of Greek identity doesn't do justice to the multiplicity of roles it has played over the ages. Describing the Parthenon Marbles as pieces of Greek identity or associating them exclusively with the vague concept of what the Parthenon was in its origin, is treating them as objects and ignoring the way they work in a different space.[34]

In the face of the question 'Where does a work of art belong?', Heidegger simply answers: 'The work belongs, as a work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself. For the workbeing of the work is present in, and only in, such opening up.'[35] Heidegger notes that art creates its own space and time. Art doesn't belong to history; art is what survives history and geography.[36] Both for Quatremère and for Heidegger, art is always a matter of a specific 'there' in which other people and entities or things are included; it

[33] Mary Beard writes: 'the unquenchable controversy has had one very clear effect. It has helped to keep the Parthenon at the very top of our cultural agenda…. The Parthenon belongs … to that elite band of monuments whose historical significance is overlaid by the fame of being famous. When we visit it in Athens or in the British Museum, we're not only searching out a masterpiece of classical Greece; there are, after all, a good number of classical temples bigger or better preserved than this that never attracted our attention…. We're visiting a monument that has been fought over for generations…. The uncomfortable conclusion is hard to resist: that, if it hadn't been dismembered, the Parthenon would never have been half so famous'. Mary Beard, *The Parthenon*, op. cit., 22.

[34] Just to be clear, I'm not arguing that they are not an important part of Greek culture; I'm just suggesting that this description is incomplete.

[35] Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', op. cit., 40.

[36] I am drawing on Didier Maleuvre's argument that anachronism is the essence of works of art. See his *Museum Memories: History, Technology Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 58–60.

is a matter of coming into relatedness with other things and people in their concreteness and particularity. Art brings things and concepts together. There is a reciprocal determination between things and concepts, and this reciprocal determination, this gathering, is how the work of art becomes itself.

These notions entail a dynamic conception of works of art (and other things as well, as Davidson would add) as being constantly in formation. The same thing has different meaning possibilities according to the configuration of the world that it inhabits and with which it has a relation of reciprocity, being revealed as much as it reveals. This means that the work of art can never be given a complete or definitive determination.[37] Hence, the presence of a work of art in a certain context can never provide a final determination for its meaning or identity. Other connections in different contexts or even in the same context show that a work of art cannot be circumscribed either to a particular site or to a final description. Different contexts, such as museums, and their new meaning possibilities, disclose things – works of art included – in new ways.

By exhibiting objects in contexts that are different from their original site, museums call people's attention to one of the most interesting features of the existence of objects in time: the possibility of their survival both beyond the cultural world within which they came into existence, and beyond the intentions of their maker. This is true not only as far as works of art are concerned but also for other objects originally conceived and produced with more utilitarian purposes.

Describing the biography of a sword, from being a weapon, to being considered sacred, to being considered valuable as part of a treasure, to acquiring the status of a work of art in a museum, Philip Fisher notes that the ontology of objects is dependent on the practices the objects are integrated into by people:

> When we think of an object as having a fixed set of traits we leave out the fact that only within social scripts are those traits, and no others, visible or even real.…It is the repertoire of practices that brought out certain features and passed over other possible features. Our access assembles and disassembles what the object is, including the question of whether and in what sense it is an art object.[38]

[37] See Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being Place, World* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2006), especially chapter 5.

[38] Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18–19.

He adds: 'That unanticipated appropriations are possible suggests that there is always a surplus of thus far unschematized fact in even the most narrowly defined objects'.[39] Fisher holds that objects carry with them the 'memory' of previous practices, but both their durability through time and their possibilities of use provide opportunity for reappropriation within new practices. (Ironically enough, another context in which this becomes evident is the flea market. It is not a coincidence that sometimes objects found in flea markets turn out to be valuable and end up in museums. The fact is that because both museums and flea markets exhibit objects far from their original context, they thereby open up possibilities for new uses and new practices.)

Descriptions of museums as ideological instruments seem to consider that museum visitors simply absorb information instead of actively interacting with other people and objects in that space. However, for the interaction they allow between people and things, museums may be spaces of renewal, and not simply of illustration and consolidation of conventional taxonomies. Much of the critical scholarship on museums has described these institutions as spaces of symbolic authority with pedagogical aims, visited by deferential and passive people seemingly incapable of reacting individually to particular objects. We need an alternative description that takes into account the contingencies of individual reactions to particular objects, a description that sees museum visitors as self-individuated active agents with different reasons to be there and whose reactions may sometimes be influenced, but not entirely determined, by the museological context.

As Theodor Adorno remarks about Proust's understanding of art, when contrasting Valéry's and Proust's points of view about this topic, the destination of artworks is not entirely determined by the intention of their creator; it is also affected by the consciousness of the persons who perceive them and use them.[40] By placing side by side objects from distant times and places, museums afford us a panoramic vision, thus triggering not only new connections between different objects and different times but also new possibilities for the

[39] Ibid., 95.

[40] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 175–185.

integration of things into people's lives. This guarantees not only the preservation of objects but also their ongoing potential to provide inspiration for new ways of thinking, creating or acting. Museums are about the present and the future, even though they may give information about the past; they are also a testament to the ways objects resist history and time.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the constant negotiation and the mutual determination between things, their surroundings, and people described by Heidegger and Quatremère de Quincy are complemented and enlarged by Davidson's views about the relationship between people and everything else. Quatremère's and Heidegger's concept of art is so ample that the relation between art and people must be integrated in the broader relation between people and things as described by Davidson. The tradition that conveys the image of museums as spaces of alienation and estrangement from so-called 'real life' doesn't seem to take into account the way people and certain important objects are always implicated in one another.

By creating new sites for works of art and other objects worthy of attention, and by making them accessible to the general public, museums guarantee that art remains part of human experience. They provide for a space where art can be interacted with and made sense of – a space where people can also make sense of themselves through these interactions. Museums are, or at least ought to be, dynamic places for mental and physical activity. They are places for questioning, and the opening up of possibilities, where art and objects disclose themselves as things whose multiple possibilities and our understandings of these cannot be tamed either by pre-given concepts or by tethering them to their original space and time.

Presupposing the notions of stability, fixity and external determination both of art and of the material world, the accusation of deracination that is traditionally associated with museums doesn't account for the multiple possibilities of being and interpretation, and the many interconnections between objects and people through time that museums witness and facilitate. In the sense that they explore the multiple possibilities of being, either of people or of objects, museums can be seen as philosophical instruments dealing primarily with ontological issues. By providing new ways in which people and things can come together, museums make us ask two important

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611600014X Published online by Cambridge University Press

questions. What is this object? How can this object be what it is? In answering these questions, we are also trying to answer the further questions of who *we* are and who *we* can be.

Associate Member of IFINOVA
defogosinais@hotmail.com

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824611600014X Published online by Cambridge University Press