

Groundless in the Museum: Anarchism and the Living Work of Art

Luis Jacob *

Abstract

This speculative text begins with reference to a conversation held in 1967 between artists Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson, focused on the question “What is a Museum?” and tackling the relationship between Art and Life. The essay argues that for anarchists, it is significant to make a distinction between the dead version of a common word – such as “democracy” – and the living version of the same word. Works of art are used as instances where this distinction between a thing understood in its living aspect, and a thing understood in its “dead” or reified aspect, becomes the very content of the work. Works of art by nineteenth-century creators such as Charles Willson Peale and Jean-Léon Gérôme are brought into dialogue with the work of contemporary artists such as Joan Semmel and Chris Curreri. The premise of this text is that artists ceaselessly try to invent images that allow us to perceive the difference between the dead version of things and the living version of things, and thus attempt to create the conditions for the artwork to come alive.

* Luis Jacob graduated from the University of Toronto with degrees in Philosophy and Semiotics in 1996. Through his work as artist, curator and writer, he addresses issues of social interaction and the subjectivity of aesthetic experience. His artwork has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto); the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York) and Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain); Kunsthalle Bern (Switzerland) and Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen (Belgium); Contemporary Art Museum (Houston) and Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia); the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach); Hamburger Kunstverein (Hamburg); and documenta12 (Kassel). Monograph publications of his artwork and writings include: *Luis Jacob: 7 Pictures of Nothing Repeated Four Times, In Gratitude* (2010) and *Luis Jacob: Towards a Theory of Impressionist and Expressionist Spectatorship* (2009), both published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König (Cologne).



Figure 1 Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822; Philadelphia Museum of Art, The George W. Elkins Collection

In 1967, the two artists Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson had a conversation focused on the question “What is a Museum?” They began their dialogue by tackling the relationship between Art and Life — how close, or how distant, can Art and Life become within the context of the art museum? Kaprow stated,

Museums tend to make increasing concessions to the idea of art and life being related. What’s wrong with their version of this is that they provide canned life, an aestheticized illustration of life. “Life” in the museum is like making love in a cemetery.

Kaprow’s words might strike a chord with many of us, and remind us of the atmosphere of some museums we have visited in the past.

This painting by Charles Willson Peale, titled *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822 (Fig. 1) depicts the painter lifting a curtain and signaling in a gesture of welcome, for those of us in front of the canvas to enter his private museum, which, it turns out, is filled with biological specimens — what Kaprow described as “canned life” — the bodies of dead animals displayed in glass vitrines.

The resemblance between the typical 19th century museum — such as the British Museum in London — and mausoleums — such as the Rosehill Mausoleum in Chicago — has been frequently observed. This similarity between museum and mausoleum holds true even in attempts to “jazz up” the museum building, as in Daniel Liebeskind’s recent architectural expansion to the Royal Ontario Museum on Bloor Street in Toronto. Though outdoors the building might appear updated to the 21st century, indoors the function of the museum remains the same as a storehouse of skeletons, dead objects presented as “history”. This function of the museum as cemetery haunts the art museum, too, and the works of art that we find there — cold, dead objects on display in a cold, dead environment.

I confess that I would find pleasure in playing this game of resemblances, but then I would run the risk of “thinking in clichés.” I believe there is something *anarchist* at stake here. Through a Google image-search it’s easy enough to find many examples of museum buildings that look like mausoleums; but Kaprow’s point — his idea that Life appears in the museum only in its canned form — would elude us. Thinking in clichés does not let us off the hook; it does not accomplish the more difficult task of thinking “in action”, for ourselves.

The problem with clichés, from an anarchist perspective, is not that they are necessarily *wrong ideas*, so much as they are the *dead* version of ideas. Clichés are readymade thoughts, thoughts performed automatically — thinking performed in a “default setting”, if you will. Clichés are thoughts inherited unthinkingly from others, rather than thought digested by us through the filter of our own experiences. Thinking in clichés, then, is the canned form of thinking in action, and is as far removed from actual thinking as the canned laughter in a television comedy is from real, joyous laughter. Clichés are the dead version of ideas — ideas lacking the spark of life. The recognition that there is a *dead* version of things, and a *living* version of things, strikes me as a profoundly anarchist recognition.

A classic example of this is the anarchist conception of democracy. For anarchists, voting every four years can be provisionally called “democratic”, but only by reference to the canned version of democracy — not democracy understood as direct democracy, self-representation, and every-day participation in the decisions that affect our lives. For an anarchist, democracy-by-vote is what you get after you remove the principle of “democracy” from actual democracy — it’s the dead skeleton compared to the living organism.

Why is that? If democracy is supposed to mean the ability to participate in the decisions that affect your life, then being able to vote — to choose between A and B — is the false version of this decision-making, since the very option between A and B on your ballot was a decision made beforehand, over which the voter has no choice. In Canada you vote between Liberals and Conservatives; in the U.S. you choose between Republicans and Democrats. For anarchists, however, “making a choice” is not the same as “making a decision”. This is so because making a decision is a creative act, the result of which is to produce the options in terms of which choices are made.



Figure 2 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1865–70; The Bridgeman Art Library

Much like the difference between “thinking in clichés” and “thinking in action”, we may say that voting is in fact “making a decision” but in a default setting. Voting is like canned life, the taxidermy version of the living experience of making a decision. (I am reminded of the anarchist slogan, “If voting changed anything they’d make it illegal.”) On the other hand, making a decision in your life entails real, living uncertainty, the experience of a kind of “groundlessness” where even the option between A or B remains as something not

yet given to you. Making a decision requires an open-endedness compared to which voting appears as an impoverishment of the imagination with regards to its own freedoms.

Artists have ceaselessly tried to invent images that allow us to perceive the difference between the dead version of things, and the living version of things. Some of these images are better than others, of course; but I believe that this is what all artists are endeavouring to do, when they are involved in making Art.

One of the prototypes of this effort, in the tradition of European painting, is provided by the story of Pygmalion and Galatea.

In Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1865–70 (Fig. 2), we see that what the artist strives for is not necessarily a realistic representation of a living model in sculpture, a representation which no matter how realistic would retain its “thingness” as cold stone – but rather what the artist strives for is an artwork that is itself alive, the “living” – not canned – version of Life. In this painting, the marble sculpture responds to the artist's desire for *the living version of things*, by miraculously becoming an animated body and grabbing him in a kiss.

It is unfortunate that in paintings like this, which we inherit from a long pictorial tradition, the artistic (and, I claim, *anarchistic*) desire for the living version of things is mixed or confused with patriarchal desires – the sexist fantasy of an inert, female object waiting for the masterful touch of the male artist who will give it life and meaning. Here, life and death, flesh and stone, strangely co-inhabit the same body, while the artist Pygmalion and the sculpture-come-alive Galatea are depicted as existing on unequal footing – he stands upon a worker's block, she on a pedestal. I believe that the patriarchal desire embodied by their encounter is represented by the small sculpture in the background on the right-hand side of the picture, as a female body whose essence is depicted as primarily seductive, a body that achieves its subjectivity by turning itself into an object of someone else's desire.

But different narratives are possible, even within this sexist pictorial tradition. . . .

Gérôme's painting *Working in Marble*, 1890 (Fig. 3), while repeating many of the same tropes as his own *Pygmalion and Galatea*, presents a rather different version of the story. In this painting, we see Gérôme himself – the artist – accompanied by a model whom he is in the process of depicting in a marble carving. The difference between the living model and the inert marble sculpture is clear –



Figure 3 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Working in Marble*, 1890; Dahesh Art Museum of Art

life and death do not occupy the same body, as in Galatea's body, but a gap separates the two. The difference between life and death, though represented as a clear difference between two distinct bodies, appears nonetheless as a surrealist difference, as an uncanny mirroring, repetition, or act of camouflage. The three figures — model, artist, and sculpture — are here placed on equal footing and share the space of the same pedestal. Already this marks a significant departure from the previous painting. And notice: the little sculpture in the background has morphed from an image of feminine seduction, in *Pygmalion and Galatea*, to one that here I would describe as an image of the experience of groundlessness. A dancer crosses the empty space of the hoop she is holding and, like Alice in Wonderland about cross the looking-glass, the dancer seems to be discovering a new reality on the other side of the round hole, a reality where model, artist and sculpture are intertwined, and exist as distinct bodies placed on equal footing to create a single grouping. Gérôme's earlier *Pygmalion and Galatea* appears on this canvas as well, as a small reproduction pinned to the wall on the left, offering a point of contrast to this new narrative where, to my eyes, different desires are represented.

Let's return now to Kaprow and Smithson's conversation. Immediately prior to Kaprow's statement quoted earlier, Smithson had said:

It seems that now there's a tendency to try to liven things up in museums, and that the whole idea of the museum seems to be tending more towards entertainment. It's taking on more and more of the aspects of a discotheque and less and less the aspects of art. So, I think that the best thing you can say about museums is that they really are nullifying in terms of action, and I think that this is one of their major virtues. It seems that your position [that is, Kaprow's position] is one that is concerned with what's happening. I'm interested for the most part in what's not happening, that area between events which could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at. A museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed.

I admit these are astonishing remarks. Here, Smithson is in agreement with Kaprow, on the idea that museums are involved in a kind of *negation*. For Kaprow, it's the negation of the living version of things, for the sake of the dead or taxidermy version of things; for Smithson, it's the negation — the “nullification” — of action. It's not certain what exactly Smithson meant by the cryptic phrase “nullifying in terms of action”, but one thing is for sure: he considers this negative aspect of museums as a virtue, rather than as a fault that needs to be overcome. He prefaced his comments earlier in the conversation, by saying, “I think the nullity implied in the museum is actually one of its major assets, and that this should be realized and accentuated. The museum tends to exclude any kind of life-forcing position.”

There is a nice double meaning here. Museums “exclude any kind of life-forcing position” in the sense that, as mausoleums, they exclude anything having to do with life-forces — vital energies, making love, what I have been calling *the living aspect of things*. But in a different way, museums can be understood to “exclude any kind of life-forcing position” in the sense, perhaps, that “Life” is that very thing that cannot be forced. I believe that Smithson embraced both of these meanings.

What does this Life that cannot be forced look like? Slavoj Žižek begins his book “Tarrying With the Negative” with an attempt to illustrate this “Life that cannot be forced”. He writes:

The most sublime image that emerged in the political upheavals of the last years . . . was undoubtedly the unique picture from the time of the violent overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania: the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out, so that instead of the symbol standing for the organizing principle of the national life, there was nothing but a hole in its center. It is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the “open” character of a historical situation “in its becoming” . . . of that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one. The sublime enthusiasm this picture bears witness to is in no way affected by the fact that we now know how the events were actually manipulated [by the Secret Police]: for us as well as for most of the participants themselves, all this became visible in retrospect, and what really matters is that the masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest “experienced” the situation as “open,” that they participated in the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief, passing moment, the hole in the symbolic order, became visible. The enthusiasm which carried them was literally the enthusiasm over this hole, not yet hegemonized by any positive ideological project; all ideological appropriations (from the nationalistic to the liberal-democratic) entered the stage afterwards and endeavoured to “kidnap” the process which originally was not their own.

This hole in the flag at the moment of rebellion — Žižek’s image for “the ‘open’ character of a historical situation ‘in its becoming’” — and, to my eyes, the image of Life in the process of being lived, of openness and profound ambiguity at the moment of making a decision in your life prior to the option between A or B — this hole reminds me of the dancer figurine (Fig. 4) in *Gérôme’s* painting.

The open hole of the hoop she holds, through which she peers and into which she inserts her body as she dances “in the unique intermediate state of passage from one social order to another”, is a manifestation of the groundlessness of the experience of “Life” in



Figure 4 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Working in Marble* (detail view), 1890; Dahesh Art Museum of Art

the mode of its freedom, Life no longer *and also not yet* subject to the forces that construct reality merely as a series of choices, thoughts performed in a default setting, and canned laughter. It's perfectly appropriate that Life in the process of its becoming should assume the form of a dancer, whose gestures disappear the moment they appear. But the dancer on the canvas is a strange figure, paradoxical, and suffused with ambiguity. This dancer is represented as a sculpture — as an object immobile, incapable of dancing, no longer in the mode of becoming — a sculpture depicted, in turn, as oil paints on canvas, upon the illusionistic surface of an Academic painting. This ambiguous nature of the open hole is articulated — is spelled out — in the three intertwined figures: the sculpture that is also a model that is also an artist, though simultaneously it cannot be an artist, because it cannot be a model, because it cannot be a sculpture — because this grouping is, in actuality, *a picture*.

I described this ambiguous dancer in the background as having discovered a new reality on the other side of the hole — reality itself experienced *as a hole* — a reality where the distinct roles of the artist, of the model, and of the work of art exist as distinct but on equal footing, each a strangely distorted mirror for the other, each a

camouflaged version of the other, and all conjoined in an intricate dance between intertwined identities.

I often wonder why it is that we look at pictures — why at times we turn towards fictions in order to conceive something true. There are two pictures that I can see hanging at the entrance of Smithsonian’s Museum of the Void. One of them is a painting by Joan Semmel, titled *Intimacy-Autonomy*, 1974 (Fig. 5).



Figure 5 Joan Semmel, *Intimacy-Autonomy*, 1974; oil on canvas; Brooklyn Museum, image courtesy of the artist

Two young bodies are depicted lying on a pink mattress of global, even cosmic, proportions, in a room whose walls are painted the same blue as that of a clear day when you can see forever. The setting is one of intimacy: a woman and a man lie naked, their bodies are turned towards one another but they are not touching. A gap runs down the middle of the canvas and separates them, though an invisible energy, a consciousness, seems to unite them as well. That consciousness belongs to the viewer in front of the work of art. We might presume that the woman’s body on the right is the artist’s own, but the image as a whole presents us with a scenario of ambiguous identities. The viewpoint orienting the scene allows the viewer to as easily identify with the man’s body as with the woman’s. Outside of the fiction’s frame, on this “real” space in front of the picture, where I stand, I will identify as being either male or female — as being either bisexual, or heterosexual, or homosexual — as being brown-skinned, or black-skinned — as being middle-aged, or as having grown old . . . But within the fiction of the picture itself, I can as naturally see this leg, this nipple, this forearm downy with hair as being like my own, while those two breasts, that arm, that

belly is “yours”, not mine — as I intuit that your soft penis, which I see surrounded by reddish pubic hair, corresponds in mysterious ways to my vagina, which “you” do not see.

I might leave the Museum with my identity and the power of the Master-Signifier intact, and walk away as that same brown-skinned, gay man that I was before. But during the moment of my engagement with the artwork, when its nature as inert object on the wall and my nature as living presence before it were intertwined, during that moment when the art object opened its eye and spoke to me in alien tongues, I experienced something groundless and I glimpsed a hole in my reality. The experience does not render me into a free-floating existence without limits or conditions. “Groundless” is not the fantasy of limitless freedom with no sexual difference, no history to tie me down, no cultural traditions that separate the people of this earth, no constraints — an angelic freedom that admits to there being no living bodies, either. There *are* indeed the facts of a situation to which I am bound, within which I must always choose one path and not another, in the context of influences and compulsions from others who share my point of view and others who challenge it, others who wish to thwart my efforts or others who invite me to collaboration. “Groundless” is the idea that, from the viewpoint of Life as I live it, the meaning of these facts of my situation and of my having taken this path instead of another — the significance of these things is never written in stone, and never ceases to be an open question.

The second picture I see on exhibit at the entrance to Smithsonian’s imaginary “museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness” is a photograph by Chris Curreri, titled *Model in the Sculptor’s Studio*, 2010 (Fig. 6).

The photograph performs an act of self-doubling — and depicts one, as well. A figure is folding in upon itself inside a sculptor’s studio, a figure that I suspect is actually a stand-in for the artwork itself. I suspect this because the square frame of the photograph before me is echoed by the square platform on which the figure stands. The figure re-enacts the story of Pygmalion and Galatea. It is the work of art, depicted this time as a sculpture still in progress, still unfinished and not yet admitted to the cold and well-lit spaces of the art museum. This figure dwells inside the studio.

Here once again is Galatea, not in the form of stone that must against all odds transform into flesh, but Galatea in the form of that pliant and fleshy point of origin prior to petrification. We call that



Figure 6 Chris Curreri, *Model in the Sculptor's Studio*, 2010; chromogenic print, central panel of triptych; image courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery

point of origin “the model” — the idea of *the artwork as model*, as picture of the world — and we can see in the strain of the model’s pose, and in the tension of his hands, the tremendous effort that is required for the figure to simulate being a “thing” that can function as such a model. But the model is not properly a thing, although it flirts with “thingness”. The model is porous; and the effort of its pose is expended for the sake of constructing a hole within the density of its body open to something beyond. The figure appears to my vision perched upon its pedestal and framed inside the picture, but it does so in order to perform a vanishing act, as it, in turn, becomes a lens that frames a view of some thing else — no, not another “thing”, but a *space* paradoxically more substantial than itself.

This space is nothing special. It contains a work-table covered with tools, work in progress, and the leftovers of failed attempts at some uncertain task — attempts suspended in an intermediate state, not deemed as having produced art, but also not yet considered as garbage worth discarding. The studio is that living realm where you,

the artist, never know for sure when the artwork has been completed, because the rationale for making the work is created along with the work itself.

The studio, in Curreri's picture, serves as a theatre-set for "Life" in the aspect of its freedom. Inside the studio there exists, for the artist, no stamp of approval from the Master-Signifier that confirms, once and for all, that Art has been accomplished. That confirmation comes later, outside the studio's four walls, in the Museum; and sometimes it does not come at all.

Art museums contain objects whose origin was in every case a place of uncertainty. Museums provide a place of rest for the artwork; but that is not where the artwork lives. Art lives whenever I approach the work stored in the museum with the hypothesis that the work's objective forms — its colours, its shapes, its textures, its sounds, its iconography, its gestures — are a reflection or echo outside of myself, of the forms of my own experience as a living presence — the hypothesis that the interplay of those sensible forms of which the artwork is made intertwine and correspond in mysterious ways to the dynamic of forms of that which, by definition, I cannot see — my Life experienced in its becoming — which I cannot see *as such* because I am one who lives it.

"Life" points us towards the possibility of a negative power — the black monochrome of the anarchist's flag — an ever-renewable incipency suspicious of "positive ideological projects." Life responds to forces wishing to usurp it by ceasing to be, and by transforming into the taxidermy version of itself. Museums do connect with Life, but not when museums become 'user-friendly' places of entertainment. Museums connect with Life through paths that in every case remain to be created by each of us. "Life" cannot be forced, and admits to no shortcuts; it turns to ice if we try. Art reminds us that we can be at home in the hole, and nowhere else.

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