

## **Explanations and Vague Propositions: Why A Museum of Capitalism?**

Adapted from our presentation at *La Grande Transition* Historical Materialism conference in Montreal, May 19th, 2018.

1. The Institutional Museum Form: problems and critiques
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5. Museum as Grave; the Museum in the Museum
6. A Museum of Capitalism as a “Transition Strategy” ?



### **1. The Institutional Museum Form**

#### **What is a Museum? Problems and Critiques.**

When we think of museums, The White Cube form immediately comes to mind as the dominant model for museums, both anthropological and art museums. The rules in these spaces are usually clear and invite a very specific audience. Very few people feel comfortable or welcome in these spaces.

In anthropological and Art museums alike, the number one rule, once inside, is “No Touching!” privileging vision as the primary sense of knowing. Especially at larger museum institutions, visitors’ bodies are disciplined by the glass cases, lighting, and docents surveilling the property, and displays are usually curated in ways that guide people’s thoughts through the lenses of colonialism and capitalism.

Another main issue is accessibility to museums- curators playing the roles of brokers, entrance fees, etc... Museums are often great tourist attractions, while working people in local areas are usually unable to afford their price of entry, the t-shirts and mugs and the cafe sandwiches sold at these venues, and are displaced by wealthy art tourism.

Anthropological museum collections can be traced back to “cabinets of curiosities” as early as 1599. These collections were based on taking objects from “exotic” places and people and displaying them in a way that showcased them as wondrous and strange objects. Anthropological collections are still based in this violent looking. In this way, museums are actually critical agents in reproducing colonial violence and sustaining it across time well after the colonial moment.



Fig 1. A current display featuring mannequins in the Chumash Indian Museum in Los Angeles. 2018.

There are many artists who have made and are currently making work resisting this colonial gaze embedded in the common museum form. We will *very briefly* outline two examples of this here, James Luna's *Artifact Piece* (1985-7), and Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *The Couple in the Cage* (1992-3).

James Luna is a Native American artist, who in this piece used his own body to speak against this museum form. While in the Chumash display, mannequins perform forever the same static scene of "culture" as defined by the lenses of white supremacy and colonialism, in Luna's piece, we are suddenly confronted with a living person who lays hours long in the gallery space for observation, not a mannequin who stands in for a person, or a group, presumed not to exist anymore.



Fig. 2. James Luna, *Artifact Piece*, 1985-7.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco also critiqued this museum form in their piece *The Couple in the Cage*, in which they pretended to be people of an until-then undiscovered tribe, and in doing so spoke to the history of colonization, abuse, exploitation, and captivity of indigenous people, and how this usually appears in historical museum displays.<sup>1</sup> Both of these pieces challenge the ideas that museums perpetuate in their very form, reproducing colonial violence by putting people in a stagnant past and putting them on display.



Fig. 3. Fusco and Gómez-Peña performing *The Couple in the Cage*, 1992-3.

These are just two examples of many projects confronting this issue of the colonial gaze embedded in the common museum form. We also see other forms of fictionalized histories being enacted and reenacted in other forms of collections of historical knowledge, for example in performances such as this President's Day Play (fig. 4 below), which celebrate colonial violence. This also begins to raise questions about what the form and purpose of a museum or historical collection is.

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<sup>1</sup>Their setting and costumes in the cage also play with temporality... there are so many complex ideas to unpack in both of these pieces that we will not address here.





Fig. 4. President's Day Play "dedicated to George Washington" taking place in the western themed movie-set-turned-town-turned-tourist-attraction of Pioneertown, CA. 2018.

We made a museum of capitalism to critique and try to address some of these problems with the traditional museum form and about the horrifying reality of the present, under capitalism.

## **2. A Museum of Capitalism: Location and Temporality**

### **What is a Museum of Capitalism?**

We've been working with the idea of *A Museum of Capitalism*, not specifying one museum with the one curator but instead keeping it more open. There are a few museums of capitalism that exist today: one in Brussels, Berlin, and another in Oakland.

<sup>2</sup> We see the necessity for people coming from different spaces and viewpoints to start museums of their own and collaborate with other Museums of Capitalism.

Our "A Museum of Capitalism" is a traveling exhibition meant to counter the popular colonial traditions of display and knowledge. Our Museum travels and changes form as it goes and works to create a space where people can imagine what it might be like to look back on capitalism and the museum form from a post-capitalist society. It does this by postulating a post-capitalist alternate-present that disrupts the present as we live in it.

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<sup>2</sup> Oakland Museum: <http://www.museumofcapitalism.org>; Brussels Museum: <http://museeducapitalisme.org>; Berlin Museum <http://www.museumdeskapitalismus.de>.

## **Really what is it- a museum of capitalism? What could it be?**

We have to look more closely at transforming the museum form. What could a museum look like in an after-capitalism situation, if museum institutions are rooted in economic and colonial violence?

Our A Museum of Capitalism draws on critiques and alternate-forms introduced by many other people and groups before us- especially experimental Soviet museums. Some key points we are specifically drawing from include:

- (1) the museum must travel to people, for reasons of accessibility and intervention<sup>3</sup>;
- (2) the museum form and the content of its exhibitions must constantly change, based on when and where it travels.<sup>4</sup>

## **Location**

We have been on the road with a Museum of Capitalism since January of 2018, setting up different versions of the museum between what is known in this present as California and Montreal, so far. In traveling to different locations and publics, A Museum of Capitalism creates a situation of *interruption* and *random social interaction in a temporary but ongoing space for social imagination*. In order to create an effective intervention, the form must change based on location.

As you can imagine, each place has posed a unique context for the Museum, and we have of course had to respond to that by changing our form- presenting to a scene of wealthy air BB tourists in the French Quarter of New Orleans is much different than engaging with students on a university campus in Texas. Our museum does not impose itself in working class neighborhoods we are not a part of. That being said, our museum is most interested in speaking with working class publics. In these scenarios we take a non-solicitous approach. We have no interest in ‘explaining’ to people that they are oppressed- particularly because they already know. We are trying to bring conversation and imagination around the possibility of alternate futures into spaces that are designed to leave no room for this.

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<sup>3</sup> “If a worker or a peasant occupied with their daily work neither has time to attend a museum, nor has yet acquired the habit of going to museums, the museum has to come to them.”

Yuri Samarin, "The Experience of Developing Mobile Exhibitions (1931)," in *Avant-Garde Museology: E-flux Classics*, ed. Zhilyaev Arseny (University of Minnesota Press: 2015), 456.

<sup>4</sup> “Museums of revolution should be organized so that all exhibits remain flexible to a certain degree, so that there is always a chance to replace corresponding materials with new, more relevant ones.”

Adrey Shestakov, "Marxism-Leninism in the Museums of Revolution (1931)," in *Avant-Garde Museology: E-flux Classics*, ed. Zhilyaev Arseny (University of Minnesota Press: 2015), 507.

A Museum of Capitalism rejects the institutional museum form, which is imposed all over the place as generally the same white-cube form that does not recognize different publics and is not in conversation with the different histories and people of places. While exhibitions may be geared towards a certain “engaging” content, the form itself maintains a colonial presence.

We need a museum that works against this form. Perhaps a museum that uses an imagination of an alternate timescape, an alternate-present, as its starting point.

### **Temporality**

As the museum travels through space, *it must also travel through time if it is to disrupt capitalism, because our experience of time is mediated by capitalism.*

Our days, our lives, are divided up into quantifiable measurements of time that are assigned value, giving us the situation of the hourly wage (drawing on Marx’s labour theory of value here). And this abstraction of life into quantifiable time and value extends far beyond the individual worker, imposing itself on the conception of history and creating a feeling that this reality will continue uninterrupted, defining the future.

Like capitalism, museums organize time and history in specific ways. Thus a museum of capitalism should also address the abstraction of time- *it must be a time machine.* By being from an imagined post-capitalist alternate-present, the Museum attempts to interrupt the automated idea of future by intervening in the understanding of the present– and to recover an understanding of the present by challenging capitalist form.

This point might be illustrated by the famous painting of the *Dogulus Alternis* :

The dog moves into the future, having looked at an alternate present and now looking back on its own present. Its double head is symbolic of two presents at odds with each other. One dog is already in the alternate present but is turned to look at the other dog’s present. The other dog looks to understand the present as shaped by a long and brutal past of colonialism. Together, the dogs, connected through flesh, bring the weight of this into the struggle to (re?)define the future. *Dogulus Alternis* looks to recover an understanding of the present.



Fig. 5. *Dogulus Alternis*.

## What is a Museum of Capitalism from an Alternate-Present?

For our version of a Museum of Capitalism, we play characters from an alternate present where capitalism has been over for sometime. We have come to this present to talk with people and do research through the creation of A Museum of Capitalism.

Mostly, the alternate present idea opens up a space for conversation and social imagining of different nows. It does not propose a strict/static idea of another future, because it is a space for radical imagining of what a future could be like by looking at the present in a way that puts it in the past.

### 3. Our Museum Forms

#### What, Where, How?

We have tried a stationary set up, we have performed a walking museum where one of us plays the role of the museum and the other the role of the docent, we have tried setting the objects out as individual specimens with individual texts and labels, we've had many conversations, we have even tried a proselytising version, but so far some of our most "successful" interactions have come out of taking seemingly mundane objects and assembling them in strange ways into a constellation of objects.

We set up one version of this on the Williamsburg bridge in New York where people walked over the water between Brooklyn and Manhattan. We included minimal labels and took an approach where we stood back and *if* people were interested in talking with us they rang a doorbell.



Fig. 6. A Museum of Capitalism on the Williamsburg Bridge  
New York, 2018.



The Museum project is largely performative and installation-based, but also has a written component: The Museum Catalogue. This document is a collaborative and constantly growing collection of writing about objects, ranging from poetry to narratives to more analytical essay forms.

Now that we have provided a brief orientation to why, where, when, and how our Museum exists, we can finally address: *What is in the Museum?*

#### 4. Our Museum Content: Objects

##### From “the baubles, the gadgets, the luxuries”<sup>5</sup> to “whosits and whatsits galore”<sup>6</sup>

A Museum of Capitalism is composed of everyday objects, displaced from the contexts they usually exist in by their placement in the Museum. We use “Object” loosely- pretty much anything can be an object in this museum, ranging from napkins to the State.

We want our museum display to be based in the *language of objects and images*.<sup>7</sup> And these images must be placed in locations and in relation to each other in ways that ask and spark questions and that un-normalise them to a certain degree. Maybe this can be as simple as bringing items usually found in the domestic sphere outside. But we have had the most interesting conversations with others when the objects themselves are having more interesting conversations with each other.



Fig 7. Collage of Objects in the Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Miller, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*, (New York :New Directions, 1970), 33.

<sup>6</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, directed by Ron Clements, and John Musker (1989; USA: Walt Disney Pictures).

<sup>7</sup> The idea of the language of objects comes up at various points in the *Avant-Garde Museology* anthology as well. *Avant-Garde Museology: E-flux Classics*, ed. Zhilyaev Arseny (University of Minnesota Press: 2015).



We use everyday objects because they are immediately available in this present; they are relics of this time and yet they are everywhere and come in and out of our lives constantly! They are situated in our museum because of their potential to inspire an everyday way of looking which sees capitalism as something that could be already abolished, something that is unnatural, absurd, violent, oppressive...

We think about everyday objects as vessels for ideologies, looking at the way objects are produced, distributed, used, talked about, and where they are placed (or “belong”) in order to understand how they are symbols of capitalist social relations and how they are actually actors that enforce and maintain those.

A vacuum cleaner, for example, is situated in a specific relationship to us and to other objects. A staple of the suburban single-family home, it tells us about the definition of the domestic sphere, gender and gender roles, the family unit, reproductive labor, and about how the language around cleaning (“purifying”, “removing dirty foreign objects”) reflects the white-supremacist underpinnings of the capitalist-present, among other things.





Fig. 8. Assemblage of recent vacuum cleaner advertisements!

### Examples of objects picked up in specific locations<sup>8</sup>:

- Sedona- Pink Jeep Timeshare Tours;
- Austin- entrepreneur barbie released on international women's day, donated to the museum by a barbie collector who parted with it because "it's not going to be worth anything";
- New Orleans- Disaster tours;
- Durham- A set of stone stairs by the chapel at Duke University built recently but to look much older than they are, pedaling the idea of legacy and prestige;
- Albuquerque- Off-Center Art Hive, a place anyone can go to make art and use materials and tools free of charge. Off Center is part of a larger art hive network that seeks to make art spaces more available and accessible to the public.

We have included a space like Off-Center as an example of a form of resistance to capitalism. We are not exactly sure what it means to put this in the museum. Our thought was to include it as a way of recognizing one of the various resistances that people are actually organizing, and to make them visible to others who may be interested in joining forces of resistance. We were hoping to be able to critique issues which capitalism initiates while also getting away from a nihilistic feeling towards the present.

<sup>8</sup> See our museum catalogue for a more comprehensive list of images/objects and explanations/analyses.

Putting “social movements” in the museum is different than an exhibit of a movement. Because the alternate-present *isn't* real, having various resistances to capitalism documented in the archives of this/a museum of capitalism doesn't lodge them in the past or imply them as a finished thing that is documented in the after-time. Their placement in the museum poses them as important counterpoints to our other objects.

## **5. Museum as Grave; the Museum in the Museum**

At the same time as we are interested in highlighting lively and active anti-capitalist movements, we are also interested in the *museum as a grave*.<sup>9</sup> The aesthetic associated with museums already has hints of death. The relics and artifacts, as they are often referred to, found in museums have been put in the past and are used to construct historical narratives. Living people and carefully selected traditions are turned into objects (as we see in the Chumash display from the beginning of this paper), artifacts themselves that are used to indicate the non-existence of actual people and traditions, that they can only be preserved and remembered here in the museum, on display in a static moment of performance, stuck in a past time. Dead.

As we attempt to disrupt this colonial gaze, we also use the idea of putting objects into the past, as if in a grave. The objects in our museum are imagined to be icons of a past, which is actually the present.

### **We come back to the problem of the museum-form.**

If we're taking issue with the idea of a museum, that method of collection and display being inextricably rooted in colonialism (cabinets of curiosities), what does it mean to use the idea of the “museum” for our form?

Adopting the recognizable museum-form for our collection, display, and writing, we expose problems with this method of looking, categorizing, and understanding that is rooted in an idea of colonialism, authority, and trained “expert” knowledge on a culture. These problems are not isolated to anthropological museums, but are also at work in art museums, determining what belongs within their definition of high art and what or who is excluded from their white walls. The institutional museum-form, being directly a product of colonialism and capitalist relations, would be abolished in a post-capitalist present...

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<sup>9</sup> An idea taken up in the Soviet *Avant-Garde Museology* book and by Boris Groys, art theorist and historian.

**Thus, the Museum is itself an object in the Museum.**

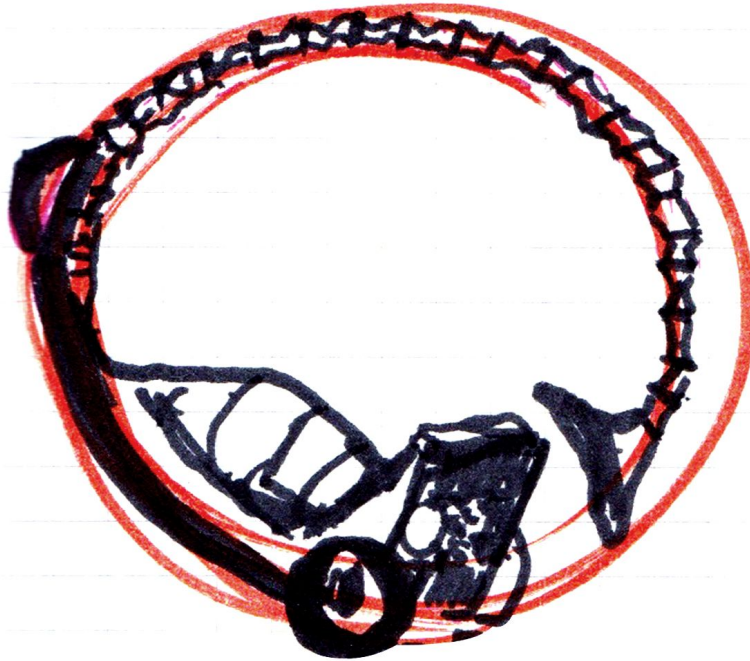


Fig. 9.

## **6. A Museum of Capitalism as a “Transition Strategy” out of Capitalism?**

We pose this question because our project and presentation had been placed into the “Transition Strategies” category of *The Great Transition* Historical Materialism conference.

It is clear that the Museum does not materially or immediately change this present. Can it be more materially involved with the demise of capitalism?

Being “a museum,” this project may be a better tool for more abstract changes, specifically in disrupting normalized ways of understanding, or to borrow language from John Berger, “ways of seeing” the ways social relations and ideologies of capitalism function and reproduce themselves discreetly through the everyday.



In his foundational series *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Berger points out why looking, in the art context and beyond, is a critical point of understanding the reality we live in. In his words, “the process of seeing paintings, or seeing anything else, is less spontaneous and natural than we tend to believe. A large part of seeing depends upon habit and convention.”<sup>10</sup>

Through its strategy of disrupting space and time, A Museum of Capitalism prys open spaces in the rigid present for making new and different visions of reality more possible. A Museum of Capitalism works at de-naturalizing normalized ways of looking and understanding.



Fig. 10. Ways of Seeing, unnatural associations by the YouTube robot.

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<sup>10</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, videorecording, performed by John Berger (1972; London: BBC-TV, 1972), YouTube video.

## Images Referenced

Fig. 1. Chumash Indian Museum display, from *Bohemian Vagabond* blogger; *Bohemian Vagabond*; <https://www.bohemianvagabond.com/adventure-awaits-in-conejo-valley/sgassociates-com-chumash-indian-museum-exhibit/>

Fig. 2. James Luna's *Artifact Piece*, from Dan Smith; *Artifact Piece*; *Art of the MOOC*; Art of the MOOC; 2016; Web.

Fig. 3. Fusco and Gómez-Peña performing *The Couple in the Cage*, image from Coco Fusco's website.

Fig. 4. Pioneertown President's Day Play, from Sophia DiMatteo and Nicola Moore, VacuumCapital; *Pioneertown President's Day Play*; *A Museum of Capitalism*; VacuumCapital; 2018.

Fig. 5. Dogulus Alternis, from Sophia DiMatteo and Nicola Moore, VacuumCapital; *Dogulus Alternis*; *A Museum of Capitalism*; VacuumCapital; 2018.

Fig. 6. A Museum of Capitalism on the Williamsburg Bridge in New York, from Sophia DiMatteo and Nicola Moore, VacuumCapital; *A Museum of Capitalism, NY*; *A Museum of Capitalism*; VacuumCapital; 2018.

Fig 7. Collage of Objects in the Museum, from Sophia DiMatteo and Nicola Moore, VacuumCapital; *Historical Materialism Slide*; *A Museum of Capitalism*; VacuumCapital; 2018.

Fig. 8. Assemblage of recent vacuum cleaner advertisements, from VacuumCapital and Google Images.

Fig 9. Vacuum Ouroboros, from Sophia DiMatteo, VacuumCapital; *Vacuum Ouroboros*; *FAQ / VAC*; VacuumCapital; 2017.

Fig. 10. Ways of Seeing, unnatural associations by the YouTube robot; from VacuumCapital; *Ways of Seeing, unnatural associations by the YouTube robot*; VacuumCapital; 2018.