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**WHILE THE ART MUSEUM** might largely be considered a place for art history—a classifying repository for artworks of the past—there is another perspective that seems far more relevant when it comes to considering why the museum is so central to Western societies and, moreover, why its role is increasingly important around the world. In short, from this perspective the museum is a place of self-government, governmentality, or liberal government—a place for a secular ritual, in other words, where categories that constitute the basis of our society are enacted and exercised. Since, to me, this understanding of the museum seems to be less recognized, I would like to convey a sense of its significance by citing some of my favorite writings by its best thinkers.

First, an excerpt from Didier Maleuvre's essay "Of History and Things: The Age of Exhibitions," which stresses the close link between the founding of museums and the emergence of modern industrial societies. "Religious cultures defined themselves," Maleuvre writes, "with respect to an invisible, subjective presence; by contrast the industrial culture of the nineteenth century derived its identity from the manufactured object-world." He continues:

But what kind of society genuflects before objects precisely for being objects (and not, as in religious cultures, transmitters of divine subjectivity)? The cultish relation to the object-world reveals the existence of a new social reality, one that was unprecedentedly bound up with the large-scale production and trade of goods, staples, machinery. . . . In less than a century, between 1780 and 1850, total international trade and production multiplied more than fourfold, yielding a manufacture output unprecedented in human history. . . . Without this mass objectification of existence in the sociological background, the creation of the great European national museums is merely an esthetic occurrence—but it wasn't. . . . "To be," "to be something," and "to have" ran together in the bourgeois mindset. The museum erected the shrine to this article of faith.<sup>1</sup>

Art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann extended such considerations to our present context in a recent lecture at London's Serpentine Gallery:

Just as visual art's attachment to the material object cultivates and refines bourgeois-industrial societies' groundedness in material production, so does art's contemporary shift toward subjective and intersubjective experience resonate with an altered, postindustrial and postbourgeois social order in which, once material needs are satisfied, immaterial and subject-related demands come to the fore. In this altered social order, the connection between the production of subjectivity and the material object has not become insignificant. To the contrary: At this point in history, when, as John Maynard Keynes said, the satisfaction of "wants" becomes a larger focus of economic activity than the satisfaction of "needs," the artwork attains a new position. It becomes a kind of role model for most of today's products as it embodies, in an almost exemplary way, the idea of a product that is low on material expense and high on subjectivity production. It is thus no coincidence that "experience" has also become a central aesthetic paradigm in visual art since Minimalism.<sup>2</sup>

My own understanding of museums was reshaped by my encounter with the writings of Tony Bennett. An excerpt from his text "Civic Laboratories":

Museums have served as important sites for the historical production of a range of new entities (like art, community, prehistory, national pasts or international heritage) which, through contrived and carefully monitored "civic experiments" directed at target populations (the workingman, children, migrants) within the museum space, have been brought to act on the social in varied ways. The role that museums have played in mapping out both social space and orderings of time in ways that have provided the vectors for programmes of social administration conducted outside the museum has been just as important, playing a key role in providing the spatial and temporal coordinates within which populations are moved and managed. "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World" is the title of one of [Bruno] Latour's articles. This suggests, as a rough equivalent, "Give me a museum and I will change society" in view of the museum's capacity, through the studied manipulation of the relations between people and things in a custom-built environment, to produce new entities that can be mobilized both within the museum and outside it.<sup>3</sup> □

*For notes, see page 380.*