

Museums Are Radical

Originally published as 'Museums Are Radical', *The Weather Project* (London, 2003), pp. 129–38.

Weather

Since the beginning of time, human beings have had to negotiate the basic conditions of temperature, humidity, and seasonal climate. The weather has been so fundamental in shaping our society that one can argue that every aspect of life – economic, political, technical, cultural, emotional – is linked to or derived from it. Over the centuries, defending ourselves from the weather has proved even more important than protecting ourselves from one another in the form of war and violence. If you cannot withstand the weather, you cannot survive.

To protect ourselves from the weather, we create body-friendly environments in the shape of buildings, using all sorts of energy either to heat up or cool down our immediate surroundings. Our reliance on these protective, climate-controlled, thermostat-regulated interiors has resulted in a growing awareness of energy issues over the last forty years. We are now slowly accepting, if not fully acknowledging, the fact that the post-war energy ideologies of our society have resulted in damaging that which they were supposed to protect us from: the climate. We are occupied with redefining methods of insulating our surroundings and ourselves correctly in relation to our local weather conditions and energy resources.

More than any other element in the history of spatial awareness, the weather and climate have been central to determining the location of cities, the development of urban strategies, and the forms and structures of habitation. The weather is part of the city and vice versa. Technically and logistically all cities are built for a particular weather condition, with an expected amount of rainfall, sunshine, wind, etc., and any significant change to this, such as a prolonged period of unusual weather, will often result in enormous stress and the eventual collapse of the city's infrastructure. A chilly day, normal in one city, could be fatal in another. The weather is 'nature' in the city, and it is one of the central aspects in creating the city's look and life. Thus, by observing and engaging with a city, we can sense much about the weather conditions in that particular place.

Every city mediates its own weather. As inhabitants, we have grown accustomed through our progressive experience of city space to the weather as mediated by the city. We experience the weather through the 'city-filter', as well as the other way around. The mediation of our awareness of weather in the city takes place in numerous ways, on various collective levels and in all aspects of life in the city. These range from hyper-mediated (or representational) experiences, such as the television weather forecast, to more direct and tangible experiences like simply getting wet while walking down the street on a rainy day. A level between the two extremes would be sitting inside, looking out a window onto a sunny or rainy street. The window, as the interface and boundary of one's tactile engagement with the outside, mediates one's experience of the exterior weather accordingly.

Orienting ourselves within these different mediations, we are able to think about the weather. We are able to talk about it with one another and to

evaluate the consequences it may have on us. As human beings gifted with the unique ability to reflect, we can talk about talking about the weather. One of the reasons why we have this strong preoccupation with the weather, and why we continue to mediate it through various layers of social tissue, is because the weather has such a strong relationship with time. The link between the two is particularly noticeable in the non-equatorial regions, like Northern Europe, where the extreme diversity of the weather – its wide-ranging seasonal variations, its continuous shifts from day to day and hour to hour – is the unmistakable proof of the passing of time. We have learned to use and relate to the weather as a mode of time. The weather helps us to get our heads around the abstract notion of what time is, making it more tangible. In the modern age, time has been compartmentalised into common concepts, predictable systems, schedules, and numbers, objectifying its aspect of continuity. But with the weather, there is always the risk of the unforeseeable. Thus the weather has never lost its central characteristic: duration. This element – duration, and the unpredictability that inevitably follows from it, the idea of constant movement or flow – is, I think, one of the basic reasons for the obsessive preoccupation with the weather.

One of the most ambitious of all the collective endeavours of humankind is time-related: the attempt to foresee the future – not in the crystal ball of the fortune-teller, but via the vast international industry known as weather forecasting. With the weather forecast we look at the time ahead of us, organising our expectations. One could say that we stretch our ever progressing 'now' into the future to the highest possible degree to avoid the unforeseeable. By predicting what the weather might bring tomorrow through yesterday's analysis, our society, with its fundamental desire to control everything, has extended our sense of 'now' to create a massive common space constantly negotiating and mediating the weather. The weather's strong relationship with time increases our awareness of the level of this mediation, so that there is a lower degree of representation and thus a higher degree of 'reality'. In other words, the weather can be communicated or experienced as an abstraction, but due to its durational and unpredictable aspects, it allows us to understand the level of that abstraction to a greater extent.

Mediation

Since this idea of how situations and things can be mediated or represented has become a crucial part of how I work in my artistic practice, I would like to elaborate briefly on what I mean by 'mediation'. Basically, by this term, I mean a degree of representation in the experience of a situation. The level or degree of representation is in a constant state of flux, varying in accordance with the different factors mediating this situation.

Let me offer a couple of examples. If you watch two people having a discussion, you experience a level of representation, though it is at the low end of the scale, defined by the particular language, behaviour, and cultural codes to which this event is subject. If you watch a film of the discussion,

you experience the higher end of the representational scale. Significantly, the film can be replayed over and over again, and the discussion thus takes place out of its own time. In between the two extremes, there are endlessly different levels of representation. If, for instance, one of the two people talking is aware of being filmed and acts differently as a result, this person, by imagining what the discussion looks like from the perspective of the camera, has altered your reception of the situation. In other words, for you (and for the person in question), the situation has become slightly more mediated. Another example would be studying a map before going out into the city. This has an impact on how you will experience and orient yourself in the city when walking through it later. The map mediates the city, and the knowledge and expectations you have about the city before going into it mediate the map.

Seeing a movie about the same city mediates it in yet another way, while an advertisement featuring the city will affect your experience in a slightly different manner, and so on. When you walk through the city, it continuously mediates itself; for example, by resembling a place you have visited before, by threatening or welcoming you, by being architecturally restored in a certain historical style, or by having surrendered to junk architecture. And you yourself can have a large impact on the mediation. You can walk down a street wearing earphones, substituting the urban sounds with an alternative soundtrack, maybe even a piece of music once used in a film featuring that exact same street. You can wear tinted sunglasses, thus altering the colour range of what you see, or soft or hard shoes, giving a different impression of the surface on which you are walking. Even your perfume will mediate your olfactory experience. We mediate our surroundings as much as they mediate us.

I have nothing against mediation *per se*. It can be fundamental to our ability to take a step back and make an evaluative and critical judgement of a situation. We use the mediation or representation of our surroundings to govern them, to advocate the social, moral, and ethical ideologies in which we believe. However, we are aware that the mediation can be, and to some extent always is, inflicted upon us through our surroundings. If mediated via a third party with intentions that might deviate from our own, our surroundings can obscure our means of social, moral, and ethical responsibility. This happens when, in our ongoing negotiation with space, we are led to believe that something is less mediated than it is; in other words, when there is a discrepancy between the levels of mediation experienced by our consciousness and our physical body. Consequently, one could argue that what happens is a displacement of our consciousness, a displacement in time, or, rather, *out* of time.

The problem with mediation – in other words, this more representational experience of oneself and one's surroundings – comes when one does not recognise that the situation in which one is involved has been mediated according to the intentions of the party mediating it. One might mistakenly take a situation for granted as a 'natural' state of things, being unaware of the constructions lying behind this situation. The challenge of orienting ourselves in a mediated realm is therefore to see through and know when, to what extent, and by whom a situation has been mediated; to be aware of a situation's relationship with time.

Museums

The (often culturally motivated) elements in society, such as museums, who have made it their responsibility to participate in society by somehow reflecting it, have largely understood that the reconstruction of a past time, according to an earlier model of seeing, is by definition impossible. The general consensus now is that regardless of which 'time' the cultural institution sets out to present, it can only be seen from the point of view of our own time. But one has to understand that this 'new idea' is also a model – a construction. And we cannot simply replace the old model with a new one, as was the aspiration of modernism. The responsibility of the institution lies in exposing the ideology of display as an integral part of the display, thereby making the mediation a part of the exhibition. Thus, the challenge lies in accepting the premises of our (singular) engagement in a situation such as the experience in an art institution. It also lies in understanding the mediated layers of a display and its manipulative power to the extent that we can make the model of display 'transparent', enabling the museum visitor to understand that the institutional ideology and display is itself a construction and not a higher state of 'truth'.

When we can 'see through' the mediation of a situation, when it is transparent, we may experience a degree of heightened self-awareness due to the self-evaluative potential that lies within a situation like this. We can never not have mediation, since our memory and expectations alone give us the first of many mediated layers. There is always some inescapable level of representation, except perhaps at the moment we are born and the moment we die. Apart from these two basic events in life, 'reality' as we know it is relative. By allowing for transparency and thus time in the mediated experience, one becomes more responsible for a given situation through awareness that it is part of a larger system of causalities, and not an autonomous element. It is a construction.

In a society, the use of mediation as a way of allowing evaluation, critique, and reflection has been the central nerve of cultural practice in general and artistic practice and presentation in particular. As long as we have had art history, we have had the discussion about whether art should be referred to as a representational system (reflecting society like a mirror) or whether it is an integrated part of society itself. If we consider art as one of many cultural trajectories in a society, these questions are little different from asking if the weather is separable from the city. Of course the art institution is an integral part of the life of a city. Cultural institutions are among the many 'immune systems' of a society's self-reflection. When a 'virus' such as the commodification of our senses attacks us, and the developing identity of the city's life is challenged, the immune system is (or should be) active in restoring a plausible dialogue involving some sense of resistance. It is important to note here that I doubt whether art has any power to change things directly; I consider the field of artistic practice to be more like a giant laboratory, where research on multiple fields is constantly being conducted. And it is of particular interest to me that artistic practice – not unlike other scientific fields – has made an effort, as

a part of its content, to negotiate constantly its relationship with society, to the extent that its method is now becoming integrated into its form, and its form is no longer fixed according to an ideal paradigm. Thus what gives art its unique influence on society is its obsessive desire to define and redefine its position (or lack of it) in relation to that society, and this provides a magnificent resource with which to challenge one's own relationship (or lack of it) with society.

When working on projects in different art institutions, however, I have sometimes been challenged by the general problem that the museum continues to define itself according to the modernist standpoint, assuming that it is possible to stand 'next to' or 'outside' of society and somehow reflect it from there. This standpoint is like assuming that the weather can be separated from the city, experience from interpretation, form from content, or time from space. It means that the institution is not acknowledging its responsibility with regards to society in general and the value of a singular experience in particular. When the *ideology* of a display or exhibition is not acknowledged as a part of the exhibition itself, the socialising potential of that exhibition is sacrificed on behalf of formal values. To avoid this situation, any chosen ideological strategy, any marketing choice, any architectural detail must not only be considered as a condition and part of the project, but must also somehow be revealed to visitors. I believe that in order to achieve a challenging engagement with art that avoids the manipulation of the viewer, every part of the construction behind the presentation of art must be made a transparent part of that presentation. Thus art can finally achieve both its social function and make visible the relationship with time with which it is engaged: to be of time rather than in time. An exhibition cannot stand outside its social context, and we have a responsibility to understand that we are a part of what we are evaluating as well as the result of it. Museums can be radical.