
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Buildings for Bodies of Work: The Artist Museum After the Death and Return of the Author

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Critiques of the cult of artists, life-and-work narratives, and the authority of authors over the meaning of their works not only unsettle the conventions of literary and art historical studies. They also challenge the importance of the artist museum and its architecture. Adopting Roland Barthes' discussions of the 'death' and 'return of the author' of the late 1960s and early 1970s as a critical lens, this article examines how the architecture of artist museums reflects and contributes to the discursive construction of the resilient figure of the artist-author. To do so, the article compares the cultist make-up of the 19th-century Thorvaldsen Museum-Mausoleum (opened in 1848) with the resolutely work-centred museums of Van Gogh (1973) and Roger Raveel (1999). The architecture of the last two examples is significantly different, however. The Van Gogh Museum seemingly negates its monographic orientation, while the Raveel Museum amends a white cube logic with a reserved interpretation of artistic individuality and site-boundedness. Parallel to the institutional interpretation of a museum's monographic mission, and the curators' representation of the artist-life-work nexus in exhibitions, architecture is yet another element in a museum's assemblage of an artist presented as a dead or revived author to its visitors.

Introduction: The Tenacious Myth

The myth of the artist-author, which naturalises and individualises art as a special kind of work by gifted individuals, appears to be a resilient cultural phenomenon. Fifty years ago, structuralist philosophers and art theorists thought they had pronounced the author's definitive death when they stripped individual subjects from their authority as lords and masters of their thoughts. This was not the first time that the attempt to trace the truth of a work back to its makers (and their specific intentions, personalities and life stories) was questioned.¹ But the critique of the 1960s and 1970s was more radical than before. At the same time, the conventional notions of work, authorship and the cult of the artist were also questioned in artistic and literary practices. Nevertheless, the categories of 'artist' and 'author' continue today to structure the circulation and interpretation of artistic production. The cult of the artist persists in discourses and practices of artists and institutions, cultural mediators and audiences (see Van Winkel 2008; Von Bismarck 2010).

The artist museum, also known as the monographic museum, is one of the categories where the cult of the

artist persists. This type of museum serves both as an individualising form of artistic discourse and as an institution that adopts the perspective of monographic continuity to organise its collections, exhibitions and research activities. It is often a celebrated destination in the hosting city, a building that provides the (implicit) cult of an artist a centre in the world. Among the numerous anthologies of recent museum architecture published at the turn of the millennium, Victoria Newhouse's *Towards a New Museum* was a rare exception in distinguishing monographic museums from other types of (art) museums (Newhouse 1998: 74–101). Yet Newhouse did not critically analyse what is at stake in the architecture of the monographic museum, writing that '[i]f successful, this museum type enshrines the artist and illuminates the output, providing a chapel-like setting animated by the dynamic relationships between objects' (Newhouse 1998: 75). Whilst it is very pertinent to take the cultist dimensions of the artist museum into account when conceptualising its architecture, the theoretical deconstruction of the venerated artist-author also needs to be considered.

This article examines how the architecture of the artist museum contributes to the discursive construction of the resilient figure of the artist-author. To do so, it draws concepts, problems and arguments from Roland Barthes' influential essay of 1967, 'The Death of the Author'. This

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material serves as a starting point for a critical examination of the 'monographic factor' in three Northern European historical examples of artist museums: the Bertel Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen (1837–1848), the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (1963–1973) and the Roger Raveel Museum in a Flemish village (1990–1999) (Liefoghe 2013). The three case studies register broader typological and museological developments of the art museum, although they are not chosen because they exemplify a typology of monographic museum architecture. Instead, they are chosen because of the major architectural differences in how, in each, the display of a body of work is combined with the representation and commemoration of an artist in ways that resonate with several aspects of Barthes' author discussion.

'The Death of the Author' is probably the best-known formulation of the structuralist critical project that aimed to destabilise the figure of the author as an individual subject in control of their work. Owing to its celebrated reception, the text gradually acquired an emblematic cultural status. Its title is often reiterated as a slogan that threatens to flatten the theoretical nuances in Barthes' argument that depart from the idea that writing means the loss of one's voice in language. Hence the unity and truth of a text are not to be found in its origin but in its destination: with an emancipated reader, always traversing a text anew, without ever 'deciphering' it and assigning it a final meaning. However, in line with Sean Burke's (1998) discussion of Barthes' (evolving) views on (literary) authorship as a 'death and return of the author', I will refer not only to 'The Death of the Author', but also to two publications by Barthes published a few years later, in 1971 and 1973. In *Sade Fourier Loyola* and *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes allows for a (conditional) return of the author in light of a (poststructuralist) pleasure of the text. Taken together, these three publications highlight how part of the construct of the resilient author derives from the fact that the author is not only a figure of authority but also a figure of desire. Questioning the authority of an author's intentions or an author's biography for the interpretation of literature or art does not necessarily discredit the author as a source of pleasure, or as an object of desire (for contact) from readers or viewers.

These different figurations of the author construct can be traced in the images and scenarios embedded in museum architecture. But the architectural analysis that follows will also trace the limitations of Barthes' conceptualisation as a critical starting point. In his original essays, Barthes addresses the issue of artistic authorship with regard to reading and interpreting literary texts. This article, however, deals with visual art, and with the effect of its being located, framed and displayed in a (monographically oriented) museum. Hence, I will primarily consider how the institutional and architectural framework in which the museum profiles an artist – through architectural representation but also through (spatially) articulating (non-)relations of artworks to each other, to biographical information, objects or a site – permits a lingering cult of the artist-author.

The Apotheosis of the Artist-Author in the Thorvaldsen Museum-Mausoleum

Barthes' 1967 text announces the death of not only one, but at least two authors. The first to die is the author as a historical individual whose life and personality become the ultimate sources of truth for dominant forms of art and literary criticism:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us. (1979: 143)

The second figure to die is the formal 'Author', whose denomination is capitalised. This God-like figure, magnified by institutionally sanctioned literary history and criticism, inspires awe and deserves worship. Throughout the essay, Barthes compares the conventionally conceived author with a deity, their work with divine creation. In similar terms, he presents the critic as a priest-servant, a passive exegete who has to read the author's intentions (Burke: 26). Hence, the author's death doubles as a deicide. The deified author figure, to whom we once submitted in full and allowed tyrannical control over the legacy of their work, no longer exists. Barthes concludes:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning ('the message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash... It is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (1979: 146, 148)

For Barthes, the death of the author is not a theoretical claim, but a fact demonstrated by structuralist linguistics. This is why Barthes' position is more radical than earlier attempts to question biography and intentionality as a basis for interpreting a work. 'The removal of the author is no longer a means to an end, a strategy, but a property of discourse itself', argues literary theorist Sean Burke. The author is now excised from his text not because of 'self-regulation', but on the basis of 'textual ontology' (Burke 1998: 21, ix). Revising the myth of the author emancipates the reader.

This institutional magnification, the almost deification of the artist-author, can be found in Copenhagen in the museum dedicated to the neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), the Thorvaldsen Museum-Mausoleum (**Figure 1**). This polychromous museum/temple for a national artist/hero was designed by Michael Gottlieb Bindsøll. Its monumental temple front, divided

into five portals with slanting doors and a remarkable fusion of Graeco-Egyptian motifs, faces a small square. The tapering portal motif is repeated on the longer side façades in two smaller, superimposed orders of columns. The lower band of columns punctuates a monumental frieze by Jørgen Sonne (**Figure 2**). Similar to other mid-19th-century (non-monographic) monumental art museums, which followed the early experiments of the Altes Museum in Berlin and the Glyptothek in Munich, the Thorvaldsen Museum represents a new building type. One typical aspect of these art-museums-as-monuments is a programmatic decoration that makes the building speak of its mission, and sets out an art-historical framework that ‘contribute[s] to the process of [art’s] mediation’ (Sheehan 2000: 132). Murals or ceiling paintings often include allegorical representations of the arts, whilst names and portrait medallions of the great figures of art history delineate the various corridors and galleries.

At the Thorvaldsen Museum, however, the ornamentation does not outline an art-historical narrative, and only partly serves to enhance the monographic character of



Figure 1: Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen: the polychrome façade with five tapering portals and crowned by a Victory quadriga group. Photo: Thorvaldsens Museum, www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk.



Figure 2: Thorvaldsen Museum: detail of the frieze by Jørgen Sonne, depicting the arrival of Thorvaldsen in Copenhagen. Photo: Thorvaldsens Museum, www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk.

this first public museum in Denmark. In the interior, the Pompeian ceiling paintings on the barrel vaults of the galleries and corridors draw their subjects and iconography from the ancient and Christian worlds. These are also the worlds that dominate Thorvaldsen’s sculptural production, in addition to the numerous statues and portrait busts of contemporary prominent figures. But the interior decoration does not refer to the artist in general, nor specifically to Thorvaldsen. Only the exterior does (Kristensen 2013: 108–15). To cite just two examples, a quadriga with a Victory figure crowns the temple front. The classical theme of the chariot race also returns in different places and scales in the exterior: in surprising variations of Ionic pilaster capitals, or in a frieze of murals on the walls enclosing the courtyard with Thorvaldsen’s grave at its centre (**Figure 3**). There, the images of the chariot race evoke the course of life, whilst murals of exotic plants evoke a Christian paradise.

Most clearly, however, the Thorvaldsen Museum asserts itself as an artist museum in the large frieze that runs across the side walls and the back of the building. Painted by Jørgen Sonne, it depicts scenes from a mythologised life of Thorvaldsen. These include the transfer of monumental statues from Rome to Copenhagen and the establishment of the museum. Sonne’s depiction of the glorious arrival of Thorvaldsen in Copenhagen in 1838 mythologises the artist. The ‘Lion’, as the tall Thorvaldsen with his wild white hair was called, is greeted by a 12-gun salute and a crowd that includes an official delegation of the Art Academy. In their biographies of the artist, Mathias Thiele and Hans Christian Andersen recount how the northern heavens sent a festive greeting to Thorvaldsen, their great son. They both imply his election as genius by nature. Northern lights appeared in the sky and, as the sculptor disembarked, the story goes, the rain stopped and a rainbow emerged (Bätschmann 1997: 88–89).

Hence, this museum clearly feeds not so much into a mere 19th-century art cult but into an artist’s cult. In his lifetime, Thorvaldsen was already an internationally celebrated artist (see Schindler 2017). The art historian Oskar Bätschmann describes how the museum’s opening in



Figure 3: Thorvaldsen Museum: courtyard with Thorvaldsen’s grave. Photo: Maarten Liefoghe.

1848 established a new centre for this international cult of the artist:

The museum appeared to be the institutional guarantee of immortality, which in turn, was seen as the continuance of a cult. In the geography of his immortality, the mausoleum and museum constitute the centre, while the works, distributed between Copenhagen and Rome, England and Poland, mark the bases, and publications keep the memory of the artist alive in the minds of art-lovers and artists. (Bätschmann 1997: 91)

The function of the Thorvaldsen Museum as a 'personal memorial' to Thorvaldsen is also promoted by the general plan of the building (Figure 4). Peter Thule Kristensen, an architect and architectural historian, suggests that

the plan's 'funnel-shaped figure' that encompasses the Entrance Hall, the courtyard containing the artist's grave, and the Christ Hall, is as important as the succession of exhibition rooms in the side buildings. This foregrounds 'the museum's dual purpose as a place where a collection of works can be kept and as a memorial to an individual' (2013: 90). But Oswald Mathias Ungers earlier suggested that the artist's memorial ends up dominating the display of Thorvaldsen's work. In one of his 1964–65 *Architekturlehre* lectures, he observes that the double ring of corridors and enfilades around the courtyard with the grave articulates a 'deifying veneration of the immortal Master' (Ungers 2006: 106). The formulation recalls Barthes' 'Author-God' vocabulary of 1967. Ungers also points out how the positioning of the grave results in an apothetic scene. The gathered busts and statues of meritorious historical individuals and gods that Thorvaldsen sculpted

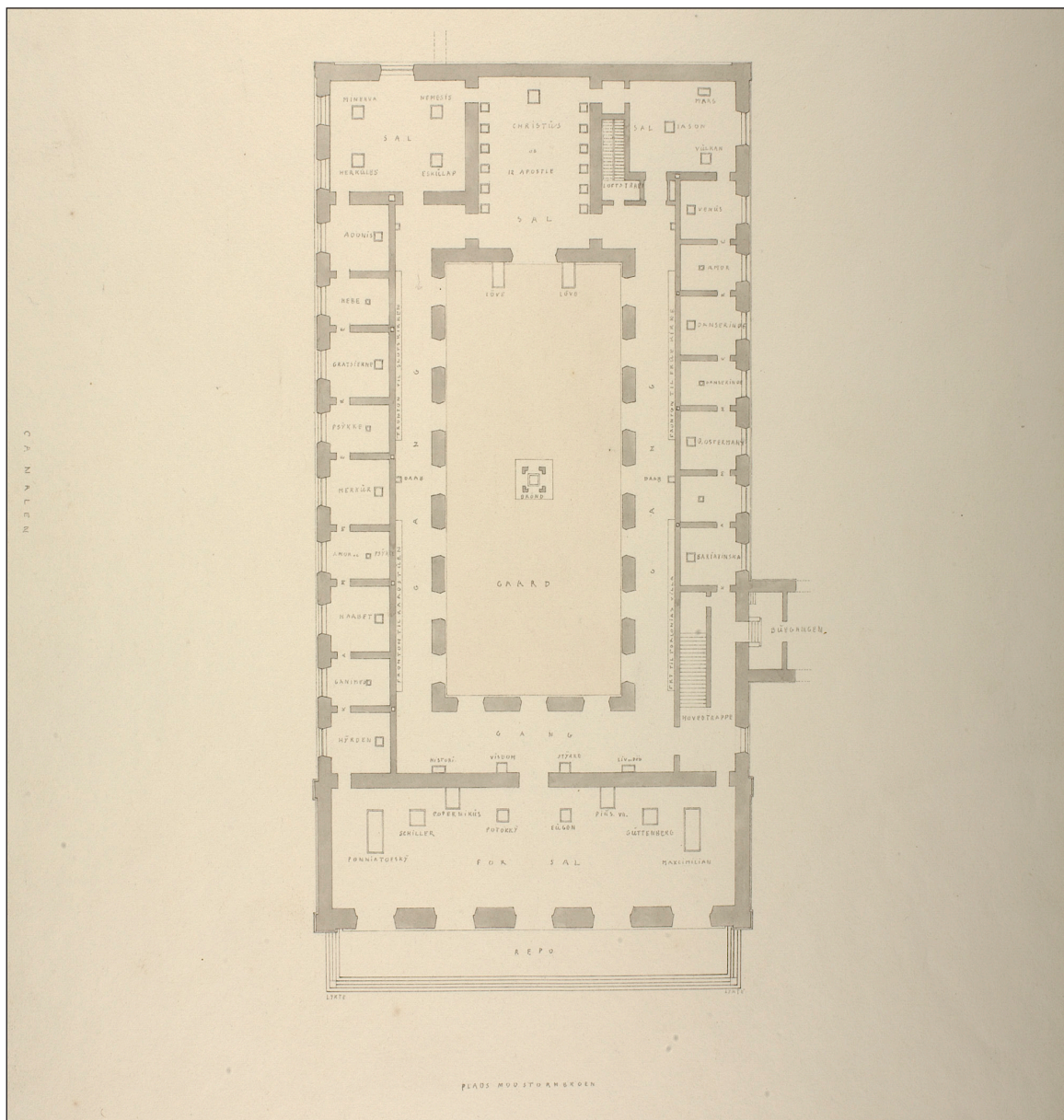


Figure 4: M. Gottlieb Bindsbøll, *Thorvaldsens Museum, Plan of Ground Floor*, 1839. The well at the centre of the courtyard would later be replaced with the grave marked by a flowerbed. Thorvaldsens Museum, www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk.

ultimately create a pantheon into which Thorvaldsen himself is added:

Drawn into the series of immortals is the grave of the artist himself. Through the angel, mediator between man and god, who kneels at the end of the row between him and Christ, the artist is led into the Hall of eternal Fame and admitted there by the Creator with open arms. (Ungers 2006: 106)

This gathering of Thorvaldsen's work in galleries circling around the artist's grave repeats the conventional scene of an artist lying in state amidst an ensemble of key works that guard and honour the defunct body (Figure 5). The works will outlive the artist and immortalise his name. That an artist's body of work is the second and more lasting 'body' that the artist leaves behind is an old idea that resonates strongly in many artist museums. This is especially the case when the two 'bodies' are juxtaposed. To become visible and be interpreted as an oeuvre, however, this second corpus typically requires operations of reproduction – Thorvaldsen's museum is mainly populated by plaster models of Thorvaldsen's artworks – re-collection and configuration to become visible and be interpreted as an oeuvre in the first place. Portfolios of graphic reproductions and mid-19th-century artist's monographs were the first to introduce this idea of the oeuvre as 'a nonstatic space within which all works by the same artist can be contemplated in sequence and can exist both individually and collectively' (Guercio 2006: 93).

In monographic museums the co-articulation that first took place in these publications becomes a matter of spatial organisation. In the Gipsoteca Canoviana, for example, the oeuvre becomes comprehensible in a literal overview. The sum of Canova's sculptural production is gathered on and in front of the walls of a large basilica-shaped gallery space (Myssok 2011). Although the Thorvaldsen Museum does not offer a similar overview of the artist's oeuvre, his artistic production is presented in a succession of thematic and formal groupings that are

still held together by the museum's simple plan organisation and consistent architectural interiors. Thorvaldsen's bright plaster sculptures stand out in front of the monochrome *caput mortuum* surface of the walls, beneath the Pompei-inspired decorations of the wall friezes and on the barrel-vaulted ceilings.

Two exceptional galleries bookmark the museum circuit, with the rest of Thorvaldsen's lifework being displayed primarily as a sequence of small galleries around the central courtyard. Upon entering the double-height entrance hall that spans the width of the museum, the visitor first sees Thorvaldsen's large equestrian statues and papal monuments. A second large gallery at the back end gathers his group of Christ and Apostle statues. Each of the smaller galleries typically presents one large sculpture opposite a high lateral window, accompanied by a few busts or reliefs (Figure 6). This arrangement results from considerations about how individual sculptures could be perceived in the best possible setting, rather than from considerations about interpreting Thorvaldsen's oeuvre (in itself, or in relation to the artist's biography). Biographical collections are on display only on the museum's upper floor. Separated from the artist's work, they are still presented in galleries that gravitate around the grave courtyard. They contain Thorvaldsen's personal art collection, his antiquities, coins and books. These are displayed next to various portraits of the artist, depictions of Thorvaldsen's life in Rome, and memorabilia ranging from pieces of clothing to locks of hair. Even a salon interior from Thorvaldsen's parents' house has been transplanted here to underline the artist's local origins.

Through its deification of the Great Artist from the mythologising biographical scenes in the friezes to the quasi-reliquary cult of biographical objects and the cultist contact with the artist's body in the grave, the Thorvaldsen Museum doubles as the Thorvaldsen Mausoleum. But it also features architectural moments of a more nuanced engagement with the artist-work-life nexus. Thorvaldsen's sculptures are dissociated from the material documentation of his life elsewhere in the museum.



Figure 5: Photograph showing Vincenzo Vela lying in state in the artist's studio-gallery in Ligornetto, 1891. Photo: © Museo Vincenzo Vela/Mauro Zeni.



Figure 6: Thorvaldsen Museum: small ground floor gallery with two reliefs and a shepherd statue by Thorvaldsen, lit through a high lateral window. Photo: Thorvaldsen Museum, www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk.

Organised in plan around the artist's grave but visually disconnected from it, the gallery cells, lit by high windows, raise the question: when does a museum setting remove the artist far enough from the work, reducing him to an authorial position of death, to allow us to 'read' his work freely? What is the spatial equivalent of reading a text and 'looking away from' its author in terms of visual art in the museum space?² A possible answer could be traced in the visually reduced framework of the modern museum gallery. First developed in the German museum reform movement in the late 19th century, this ahistorical presentation of artworks relies on their aesthetic perception by the visitors. The *Atelierraumsimulation*, which museum historian Alexis Joachimides (2001) describes as this movement's ideal in the 1920s, is rooted in this tradition. It is also the direct precursor to the post-war 'white cube' exhibition space.

The term 'white cube' was coined by artist-critic Brian O'Doherty in three essays in *Artforum* in 1976 (O'Doherty 1999). In these texts, O'Doherty questioned the modernist gallery's ideological presuppositions and described its perceptual effects on 'disembodied' viewers of 'autonomous' artworks. Nine years earlier, in 1967, O'Doherty was the guest editor of the double issue (numbers 5–6) of the American magazine *Aspen*, which was dedicated to modernist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and came in a box that contained a booklet with texts but also 4mm films, sound recordings and a sculpture model.³ This was where Barthes published his 'The Death of the Author'. Here, he portrayed Mallarmé as the first French writer to let language speak, rather than the author. In Paul O'Neill's short history of the emergence of curatorial discourse, the *Aspen* double issue exemplifies a typical 1960s collapse of 'artwork . . . , curatorial structure . . . , techniques of mediation . . . and exhibition format,' in the same way that guest editor O'Doherty conflated the 'traditional roles of artist, curator, and critic' (O'Neill 2012: 19, 22). From the early 1970s onwards, this messy constellation would get somewhat clearer again due to a 'change of heroes or roles in the art world from the personality of the artist to that of the curator' (Beatrice von Bismarck, quoted in O'Neill 2012: 22). Whilst this development would have a tremendous impact on the production and mediation of contemporary art, and especially in exhibitions outside museums, its impact on artist museums initially remained limited.

The Death and Desire for the Author in the Van Gogh Museum's White Space

The Vincent Van Gogh Museum (1963–73) in Amsterdam belongs to a post-war generation of art museums that extend the white cube logic from the gallery to the whole building (Figure 7). Based on an original design by Gerrit Rietveld from 1963, the museum was eventually built by J. van Dillen and J. van Tricht (see Blühm 1999) to house the family collection of Van Gogh's nephew, V.W. van Gogh.⁴ Both characteristic of Rietveld's architecture and of the broader post-war conception of museums as 'machines à exposer', this high-modernist museum building is a concatenation of airy, light-flooded yet rather generic exhibition spaces. Not aspiring to convey any image of Van Gogh or his work, either on the exterior or the interior, the design seems to respond only to V.W. van Gogh's explicit demands for brightly lit gallery spaces.

Van Gogh's paintings were originally presented in looped circuits on the first- and third-floor galleries, both of which were top-lit through a combination of artificial and filtered daylight, without views to the exterior (Figure 8). The second floor was a dimmed drawings cabinet, entirely closed off from the exterior and from the atrium. The introverted museum was organised around a three-storey atrium, animated by an open staircase (Figures 9 and 10). Some critics compared this setup to



Figure 7: Van Gogh Museum, seen from Museumplein, 1975. Photo: Jan Versnel.



Figure 8: Van Gogh Museum, view on the main gallery on the first floor, 1975, with the paintings as 'dots in a dotted line' (Henket 1975: 205). Photo: Jan Versnel.

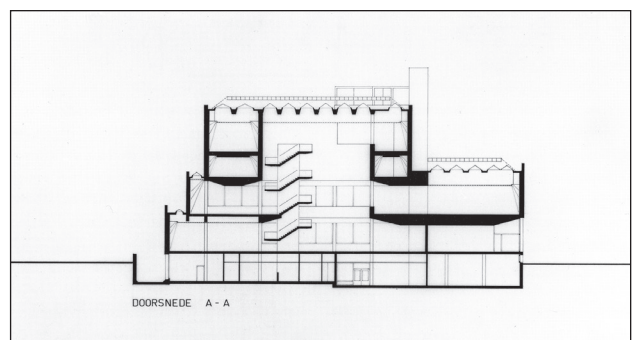


Figure 9: J. Van Tricht, 'preliminary design' for the Van Gogh Museum, cross section through atrium, 1967. Photo: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.

contemporary museum projects like Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York or Le Corbusier's Museum of Western Art in Tokyo. But this empty spatial heart could also be associated with an absence of the artist-author. There is nothing in this design specifically geared towards a *monographic* museum institution. The architecture does not imply it is specifically devoted to presenting Van Gogh's works, let alone to presenting 'Vincent'.



Figure 10: Van Gogh Museum, view on atrium with stairs, 1975. Photo: Jan Versnel.

This architectural 'indifference' of the museum contrasts strongly with the powerfully tragic mythology that surrounds Van Gogh and his work (Heinich 1996; Pollock 1980; Jacobs 2012: 22–26, 38–64).⁵ But when the Van Gogh Museum opened its doors in 1973, the story of this life was downplayed to foreground Van Gogh's works.⁶ The museum prides itself in owning a third of the artist's total production, the largest collection of his work in the world. From the outset, the museum presented itself as a monographic *art* museum, not a person's museum, let alone a place of cult. Situated on the Museumplein in Amsterdam, the museum is structured inversely to the numerous *lieux de l'oeuvre* or *lieux de vie* that punctuate the Van Gogh memory landscape (from Van Gogh's house of birth in Zundert, over Arles and Saint-Rémy, to Auvers-sur-Oise where Vincent and his brother Theo are buried). It presents an extensive collection of his works on a location without biographical significance, and in an architecture that adheres to the decontextualised placelessness of the modern art gallery. Displaced from the initial historical contexts of their making into the museum, his artworks can be appreciated as autonomous fragments. These fragments are subsequently 'restored' to the presumed wholeness of a lifework, thanks to the development narrative suggested by their chronological arrangement. The architect Hubert-Jan Henket questioned this schematic representation of the artist's development in the form of 'dots in a dotted line', calling the 'experience of seeing one man's life-long development in a few hours flat' a surrealist one (Henket 1975: 205). Henket seems to criticise the absence of biography from this development narrative.

The white cube-like gallery interiors were also critiqued as ill-suited in size and atmosphere to present the Van Gogh collection. Writing for the *Architectural Review* (Figure 11),

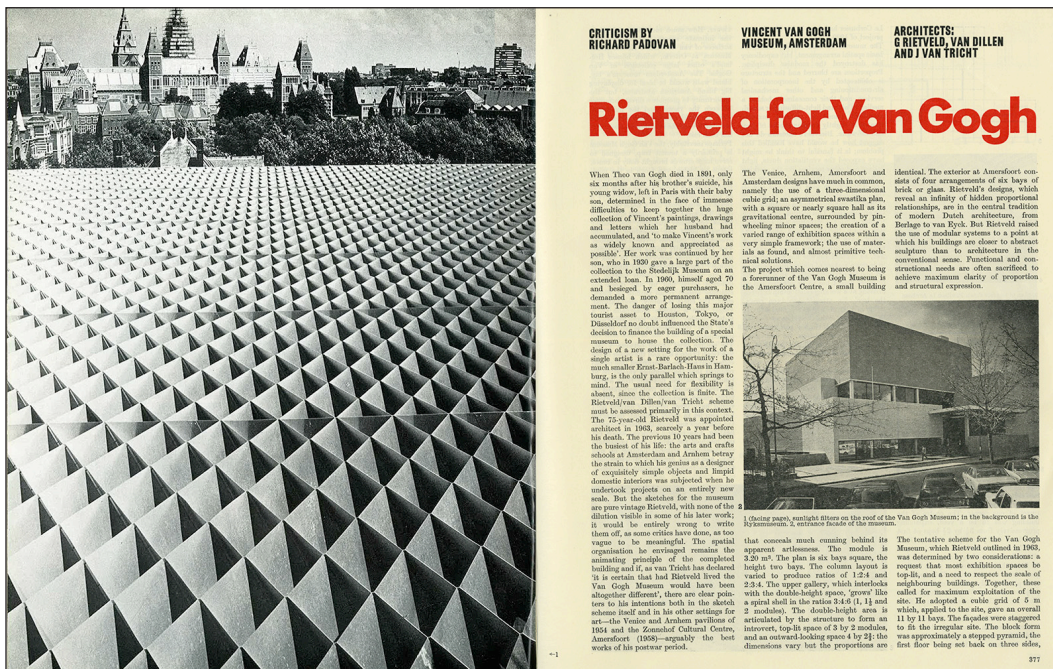


Figure 11: Opening spread of Richard Padovan's review of the Van Gogh Museum in *The Architectural Review* (1973: 822). The photo on the left shows the roof lights that filter sunlight into the white cube galleries on the top floor; the Rijksmuseum looms in the background.

Richard Padovan (1973) challenged the museum design for its insufficient understanding of Van Gogh's art. Padovan specifically questioned the way in which the museum presented Van Gogh's small works in wide spaces. Distancing the viewers from the works, this way of exhibiting went against the character of Van Gogh's 'personal statements':

Each of Van Gogh's works is an intense personal statement, a cry from the heart. Hung side by side on wide white walls in a uniform unrelieved daylight, they resemble specimens in a psychiatric laboratory; one regards them with detached interest, remembering the cut-off ear. . . . Each painting seems to cry out for enclosure, for separation from its neighbours, for a room-like setting in which it can speak directly to an individual viewer. . . . The Amsterdam museum's big, bland walls would be ideal for displaying big bland American abstracts, but the opportunity to promote a direct encounter between the viewer and the individual work, the shock of immediacy which could have made even the sunflowers a discovery, has been lost. (1973: 378)

Read in the light of Barthes' 'Death of the Author', Padovan's criticism is significantly ambiguous. He bemoans the absence of more smaller galleries that would have allowed for more intimate encounters of visitors with the artworks. Rather tellingly, he also suggests this is vital for Van Gogh's oft-reproduced art. He assumes that '[t]he shock of immediacy' could have enabled viewers to see even the most familiar works afresh. It would open them up to new interpretations from emancipated visitors-readers. But calling Van Gogh's works 'cries from the heart', Padovan also reconnects the artworks to their author and activates a biographical mode of their interpretation.⁷ His comparison of the museum with a psychiatric laboratory is more than a negative portrayal of the museum as a place that imprisons art. In this case, it also alludes to Van Gogh's hospitalisation after a nervous breakdown. Finally, Padovan's remark that one regards the paintings 'remembering the cut-off ear' suggests that Barthes' emancipated readers can still activate the Van Gogh myth. Hence, a work that is presented as autonomous modern art in a Van Gogh museum devoid of relics can still be turned into a relic of the artist-author already mythologised in discourse outside this museum.

This conjuring up of the absent biographical subject is comparable to the 'amicable return of the author' that Barthes (1989: 8) discussed in *Sade Fourier Loyola* (1971) and *Le plaisir du texte* (1973), only a few years after the more famous 'Death' essay. This return of the author did not contradict Barthes' earlier position. It was rather a qualification of it. The return of the author did not endanger the reader's newly acquired freedom of interpretation that eschewed totalising life-and-work narratives: '[T]he author will reappear as a desire of the reader's', summarised Sean Burke, 'a spectre spirited back into existence by the critic himself' (1998: 30). This author is no longer an authoritative subject, but an object of pleasure to be enjoyed. In *Sade Fourier Loyola*, Barthes studies and enjoys

the idiosyncracies in the new language of each of the three authors. But at the end of the volume, he also adds a 'Life of Sade' and a 'Life of Fourier'. They are collections of 22 and 12 fragments of a biographical account, listing minor biographical details Barthes was touched by, such as Fourier's preference for Parisian *mirliton* biscuits, or the way in which he surrounded himself with flowers and cats in his old age. Barthes further developed his ideas around the author as a source of pleasure to be enjoyed in reading a text in *Le plaisir du texte*:

As institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; but in the text, in a way, I desire the author. (Barthes 1998: 27)

Provocatively, Barthes compared this desired presence of the author as a figure in the text not to an intentional subject, but to a body. But however bodily it may sound, as well, Padovan's suggestion that visitors will always interpret Van Gogh's works remembering the episode of the ear is not quite the 'amicable return' that Barthes welcomed. The ear anecdote does not relate to the author as a body of artistic idiosyncracies, as another form of erotic presence *in* the work, or as a nebula of seemingly random touching biographical details. It simply still refers to Van Gogh as a mythologised biographical subject, the madness and self-sacrifice of the genius artist.

In the following decades, the museum would change its stance vis-à-vis the mythologisation of Van Gogh's life. The Van Gogh myth was accepted as a given, as something the museum should not ignore, but face and discuss critically. A new presentation of Van Gogh's work also situated it critically in the artist's biography and within the broader spectrum of 19th-century artistic developments. Van Gogh's works were now presented alongside his letters and other archival material, and juxtaposed with selected works by contemporary artists. Coloured backgrounds and more contrasting illumination were gradually introduced, and at some point, a life-size historical photograph of the double grave of Vincent and Theo in Auvers-sur-Oise was also installed at the end of the permanent exhibition. This arrangement is still in place today. The enlarged photograph of the grave renders the visitors' uneasy desires for connection with a (venerated) artist visible. But it also exemplifies the curators' eventual acknowledgement of this desire.

White Cubes on Site, with Character: The Roger Raveelmuseum

The *retour amical* of the artist-author follows and depends on the birth of the emancipated reader-beholder. But this emancipation is real only if the reader can also decide to make an author's intentions or biography have some bearing on the interpretation of a work he or she is considering. Along these lines, the Roger Raveel Museum (1990–99) that opened in the Flemish town of Machelen-aan-de-Leie in 1999, could be called an emancipating museum build-

ing. Its architecture does not force visitors to understand the paintings and installations of Raveel as puzzle pieces in a life-and-work totality, nor to apprehend the artworks as 'texts' entirely isolated from their author. It rather allows them to relate the exhibited works to a biographically and thematically significant spatial context outside the galleries: the sleepy river village in which Roger Raveel (1921–2013) was born. For most of his life, the artist lived and worked there. Many scenes in his paintings and installations seem to be drawn from this hybrid universe of a traditional village in the process of modernisation.

The museum consists of a converted 19th-century presbytery and coach house, and a larger tract of purpose-built galleries that was added to it (**Figures 12, 13 and 14**). Visitors enter the museum through the new volume. This



Figure 12: Roger Raveel museum, 1999, the new volume in between the presbytery and a new park. Photo: Jan Kempenaers.

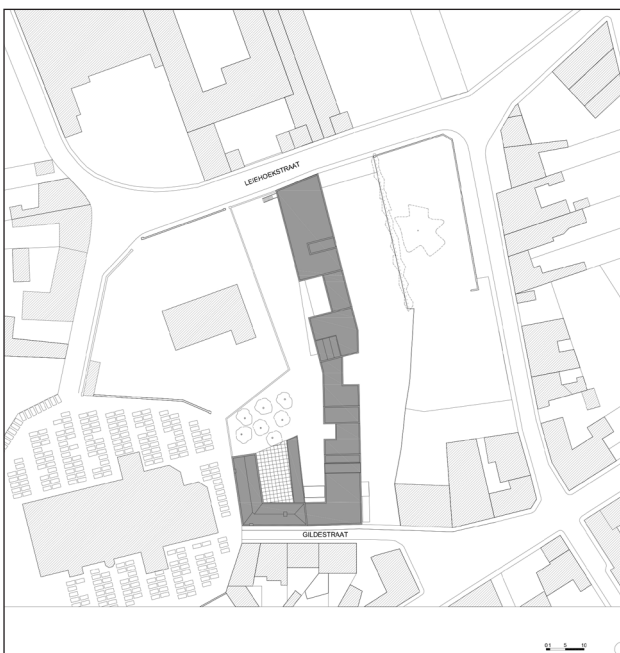


Figure 13: Stéphane Beel Architects, Roger Raveel museum, site plan, 1995. Stéphane Beel Architects.

first stretch of galleries presents about 60 of Raveel's works. Visitors must then retrace their steps and traverse this series of galleries in the opposite direction, an alienating experience of rewinding the artist's development. Back in the entrance hall, they can take a staircase to a second circuit of galleries in the new building and on the old presbytery's first floor. Here, temporary presentations of Raveel's earliest work alternate with thematic exhibitions. The architect Stéphane Beel compares this stretched trajectory through the museum to 'a marvellous walk around a covered garden path' and into the townscape (Beel n.d.). The variegated galleries paradoxically serve as site-conscious white cubes. They unfold in an irregular succession tied to the way in which the museum weaves itself into the village fabric.

In the two first mid-sized galleries, Raveel's paintings depict domestic scenes of the 1950s: kitchen tables with chrome-plated coffeepots; backyards with prefabricated concrete stakes and wall panels; men wearing caps and women wearing high heels (**Figure 15**). In a subsequent complex succession of smaller rooms, visitors encounter Raveel's abstract paintings, alongside paintings and installations that also include everyday objects and mirrors. A double ramp takes the visitor to a large, top-lit gallery on the first floor at the far end of the museum site, where some of the latest and largest works of Raveel can be found (**Figure 16**). Each subsequent gallery has a distinct character thanks to the range of room sizes, and the variously positioned doors and windows of alternating size and orientation. Taken together, the galleries make up a succession of *places* inside a greater gallery landscape. This sense is further enhanced through the explicit connections of the interior with the village outside. In one gallery, a bend in the parcel of its sloping floor underscores the gallery's hinging structure. Occasional windows offer direct views to the exterior from the galleries. These views look out on rows of poplars, the concrete fencing bordering of a public park, the walled presbytery garden, a school, a church (**Figure 17**). The museum also frames views on itself and on its situation in the village. But the



Figure 14: Roger Raveel museum, view from the public park. Photo: Jan Kempenaers.



Figure 15: Stéphane Beel, Roger Raveelmuseum, section, ground floor plan, and elevation, 1995. Stéphane Beel Architects.



Figure 16: Roger Raveel, *Vanuit mijn tuin (View from my backyard)*, 1949. Oil paint on paper, affixed to a multiplex panel, 57.5 × 56 cm. Collection Stichting Roger Raveel, courtesy of Marleen Raveel-De Muer. Photo: Peter Claeys.



Figure 17: Roger Raveel museum, groundfloor gallery. Photo: Jan Kempenaers.

building also preserves the museum interior as a pristine, distinct realm, albeit set in relation to its surroundings. The museum is architecturally materialised as a void that aestheticises the artworks on display, whilst keeping the village one step removed from these exhibits. In the words of the critic Geert Bekaert, the various halls, rooms and cabinets 'give [Raveel's work] its right environment by just dissociating it from the village to which it refers, without cancelling out its connection with it' (Bekaert 1991: 2).

In this aspect, the Roger Raveel Museum is comparable to the Kirchner Museum in Davos, designed by Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer in 1992, which is also established at a location that is biographically significant for its featured artist.⁸ Both museum buildings depart from a precise variation on the theme of the generic gallery space and turn the (dis)connection between work and site into an architectural theme. The Kirchner Museum's exhibition spaces are organised as four exquisitely materialised, large, top-lit white cubes. These are accessible from a lower concrete-finished circulation area in between the prismatic gallery volumes. The circulation area's perimeter walls are entirely glazed, offering generous views on the alpine landscape where Ernst Ludwig Kirchner spent his last years. Victoria Newhouse criticised the Kirchner Museum for its 'programmatically insistence on neutral architecture and changing exhibitions [that] shifts its focus away from the artist to whom it is dedicated' (1998: 89). But other critics lauded the 'cautious mediating between the world inside and the world outside' (see Schmitz 1993: 57). Kirchner's work appears in the placeless white cube exhibition interiors, where it can (only) be assessed on its own.

But the intermitting views from within the circulation area still situate the viewer and the whole museum in Davos, on a location related to Kirchner's life and work.

Where the Kirchner Museum refrains from any architectural representation of Kirchner, the Raveel Museum opts for an indirect representation. The building does not literally incorporate formal motifs from Raveel's work, such as the frequent white squares or the mirrors with holes in them, but demonstrates instead a characteristic attitude of kinship and difference towards the village that also characterises Raveel's work.⁹ From the outside, the building appears as an irregular string of cubic volumes of various heights, irreverently modelled after the Belgian vernacular annexes at the back of the village row houses (Figures 14 and 15). Stylised, however, and at a larger scale than these annexes, the museum-string also enters into a dialogue with a series of larger buildings that structure the village (including the church bordering the river Lys, the old presbytery, the Holy Mary Institute and a couple of small factories). Pointing to this monumentality at the scale of a village, art historian and critic Steven Jacobs characterised the project ambiguously as 'the most dignified shrine Raveel could have imagined' precisely because it 'avoids any magniloquent monumentality' (1996: 11).

This nuanced architectural articulation of the relationship between an artist's oeuvre and a given location transcends the conceptual limits of Barthes' critique of authorship. 'Beel completes the village by making room for the work of Raveel', Geert Bekaert wrote. 'This found architecture . . . holds as much to the village in which it integrates itself as to the work that it wants to integrate, a clear moment of recognition, a faultless double mirror, with holes in it like the ones Raveel loves to use' (Bekaert 1991: 3). In non-conclusive fashion, and with an enriching acceptance of ambiguity, the museum both lifts Raveel's body of work out of and presents it against the backdrop of Machelen-aan-de-Leie. In so doing, it also keeps the artworks from coalescing with the village. It is therefore up to the visitors to construct these interpretative relations.

Institutional and Architectural Resiliences of the Artist-Author

In their dual capacity as buildings and institutions, the Thorvaldsen, Van Gogh and Raveel museums exemplify the dynamics of celebration, death and return of the artist-author. Their respective architecture celebrates a great artist, negates the museum's monographic orientation and reservedly interprets artistic individuality and place-boundedness. In the artist museum the resilient cultural figure of the artist-author can find a stage and a space of resonance because it is a structurally hybrid institution. From the outset a memorial dimension grafts itself onto its function as monographic art museum. This institutional hybridity serves as the substratum for the persistence of myths and cults of artistic authorship. Today, artist museums present themselves as monographically specialised art museums. But their collected bodies of work still revolve around and reproduce the individualising principle of the artist-author. Their very

existence perpetuates the artists' names and inscribes them onto a territory.

In addition to this institutional dimension, the museum's architecture also accommodates the resilient artist-author in its own way. The disappearance of programmatic iconography in buildings for artist museum, which was still traceable in the Thorvaldsen Museum, is part of the broader trend since modernism drained museum architecture of much of its meaning. But if the elevated temple gave way to white cube spaces – even if often in iconic dress – as the default museum infrastructure, often a zero degree of monumentality remains in the museums' mere size, materiality or finish. Connotations of the shrine remain alive, as exemplified in the Raveel Museum. Similarly, the artist museum's narrative of an artist's (life and) work is no longer told (only) through the medium of architecture as receptacle for a permanent installation. It is also constructed through the museum's changing displays and exhibitions, where the gallery architecture serves only as a support structure. The representation of an artist therefore becomes the main responsibility of the museum's curators. The designer of the Van Gogh Museum chose to ignore the artist's mythology to focus on his art. But the museum's administration later decided to address the Van Gogh myth, and to confront it with historical facts and a nuanced representation of the artist's life. In this change, Rietveld's architecture was irrelevant. Nevertheless, an exhibition narrative requires spatial succession, and architecture can promote or question it. The Raveel Museum does this when the routing requires visitors to retrace their steps and rewind the artist's development. Architecture can also interfere with the curatorial exposition through its own connotations or character. In its interaction with the village context, the Raveel Museum advances the theme of sympathy and rupture with the Flemish village, in the work of both the artist and the architect. This in turn interacts with the exhibition narrative of the developments in Raveel's oeuvre. But what does the visitor make of it all?

The scriptable but uncontrollable acts of visiting and interpreting a museum harbour a third fundamental, yet elusive, mechanism of a possible 'death and return of the author'. This mechanism allows a visitor to bring more than an intertext of mythologising popular conceptions into the museum. It is also a critical factor for the appreciation of more implicit and ambiguous figurations of the artist-author, ranging from experiencing the art on display as one body of work, to projecting the artist into it. Visitors may also develop a sense of getting closer to and making contact with the artist through the works, the biographical material or the museum site in the artist's *lieu-de-vie*. As Barthes suggests, the author thrives on the boundary of meaning and desire. It is up to the visitor to find sense in the arrangement of Thorvaldsen's tomb on an axis with the Christ in open arms, or in the everyday views of the village of Machelen. It is also up to the visitor to cultivate the sensation of proximity when seeing Van Gogh's brushstrokes or when walking through the rooms that hold Thorvaldsen's sculptures whilst at the same time circling around the artist's tomb. The artist in the artist museum is not the only author, and neither is the architect or the

curator. The meaning of the assemblage of works of art, exhibition halls, specific places and biographical relics is reconstructed by each new visitor, who fabricates their own version of the artist as author. This construction of meaning cannot be prevented by neutral architecture, nor does it require it.

Notes

¹ Earlier characteristic formalist dismissals of author criticism are Marcel Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and the American New Criticism of the 1950s. See Benett (2005) and Salas (2007).

² I refer to Bart Verschaffel's essay 'Douce Métamorphose!' (1998: 167): 'the structure of the literary reading is that of respect: *re-spicere*, looking away' from the intimate first contexts of a work and from the private meanings works can have in these contexts. Giving nuance to Barthes' argument that the literary reading of a text is structurally anachronous, Verschaffel stresses that it is primarily a spatially recontextualised reading.

³ Contributors included artists and critics such as Marcel Duchamp, Sol LeWitt, Merce Cunningham and Susan Sontag. Alexander Alberro argues that 'in choice of participants, O'Doherty was concerned with reinstating the often maligned legacy of European modernism' (2001: 171).

⁴ V.W. van Gogh had transferred the collection to a newly established foundation in 1962, the Vincent van Gogh Stichting, on the condition that the Dutch state would provide a new Van Gogh museum building to make this collection public.

⁵ Barthes also referred in passing to the case of Van Gogh to illustrate the hold of a life over the interpretation of an artist's work, in the passage quoted earlier (1979: 143).

⁶ It is not easy to distinguish between cult and its absence. Nathalie Heinich describes the sanctification of a modern artist as a series of sociological transformations in his or her reception. Scandalising the artist's fate opens a never-ending cycle of gift and debt: the unjust disproportion between the recognition lacking during the artist's lifetime and the artist's posthumously rising star is the basis for a collective experience of guilt and redemption by veneration vis-à-vis the artist-saint (Heinich 2005: 202, 282–284). The opening of the Van Gogh Museum entirely fits in this dynamic.

⁷ The title of the review doubles this, mirroring the artist-author with the architect-author. 'Architect for Artist' is a true topos in the architecture criticism of the artist museum. Other examples are Mackay (1976), Montaner (1988) and Gleiniger and Stumm (1996).

⁸ The Raveel Museum, however, does not comply with the model of 'the simple, neo- or late-modernist "box"' to which the Kirchner Museum and several other Swiss art museums of 1990s subscribed (Von Moos 1999: 15).

⁹ Typically for Stéphane Beel, the building is at once familiar and 'estranged' (Cortes 2005: 31).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Liefoghe, M. 2019. Buildings for Bodies of Work: The Artist Museum After the Death and Return of the Author. *Architectural Histories*, 7(1): 12, pp. 1–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ah.296>

Published: 12 June 2019

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