**THE SPECULATIVE AND THE PROFANE**: **Reimagining Heritage and Museums for Climate Action**

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**Introduction: Heritage, Museums, and Precarity**

Natural and cultural heritage have always existed in a symbiotic (or, as some might argue, parasitic) relationship with different forms of precarity and uncertainty. Age, physical decay, targeted destruction, neglect, the loss of habitat, the erosion of cultures and languages, and many other phenomena besides can be seen to have motivated the emergence and spread of heritage over the past two centuries (see discussion in Harrison 2013). Far from being an inevitable response to cultural, political, economic, and environmental shifts, however, the ‘endangerment sensibility’ (Vidal and Dias 2016) underpinning heritage practice should be understood as a contingent and in many ways highly inequitable moral and ethical framework for the field. Who gets to decide what counts as ‘precarious,’ and what kinds of activities might be enacted to protect or stabilise the things (objects, sites, people, ways of life) brought under this banner, remains a vital point of debate for heritage theorists and practitioners alike.

From one perspective, the various crises currently impacting on populations around the world would seem to occasion a doubling-down of the endangerment sensibility. With the planet itself now categorised as ‘at risk,’ the urgent need for conservation, preservation, and sustainable ‘stewardship’ of the Earth system has gained serious traction in many areas of the social and natural sciences (e.g. Steffen et al. 2018). At the same time, the intersecting crises of climate breakdown, mass extinction, the pandemic, and widespread inequality have reinforced movements for radical change. Crucially, this has often involved a critical engagement with the legacies of the past in the present, particularly in response to the racialised violence of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery (e.g. Azoulay 2019; Yusoff 2018). While traditionalist voices continue to advocate for stability or—at best—incremental change, the very ground on which such decisions might be made has shifted. This has brought the moralising power of the endangerment sensibility into sharp focus, not least in relation to the nativist desire to protect obsolete monuments and uphold nationalist myths.

Against this backdrop, it is disconcerting to realise that perhaps the most visible response to the Earth crisis emerging from heritage practice over the past decade has been a renewed call for greater conservation, rather than any fundamental questioning of the purpose of heritage in an age of ecological collapse. Initiatives such as ICOMOS’s ‘Future of Our Pasts’ report and Europa Nostra’s ‘European Cultural Heritage Green Paper’ ostensibly position heritage (broadly understood) as a vital tool in the fight against climate change, but the moral framework underpinning such work continues to prioritise preservation in the face of precarity (real or imagined). As consciousness of climate change and its impacts has grown, and as museums and the wider heritage sector have responded to this emergency, activity has largely focused on familiar processes of documentation, assessment, collecting, management, and conservation—only done faster, or with more resource allocation. Recent comparative work on natural and cultural heritage practices has suggested that such activities are largely unsustainable from an economic, ecological, or material perspective, especially when current predictions of future change are taken into account (see Harrison et al. 2020). Here, we join others in arguing that heritage and museums need to begin to imagine new ways of valuing, caring for and conserving the past in the present; ways that might take us ‘beyond saving’ and explore whole new forms of heritage thinking and practice (see DeSilvey 2017; DeSilvey and Harrison 2020; Harrison et al. 2020; Sterling and Harrison 2020).

This chapter introduces two key concepts that seem vital to any project of ‘rethinking’ heritage and museums in precarious times. The first of these is the idea of the speculative, a broad theme in literature and creative practice that we explore with specific reference to Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby’s work on speculative design (2013). The second is the profane, a term borrowed from Agamben’s work on the apparatus (2009), itself an extension of Foucault’s definition of the dispositif (1980). Where the speculative gestures towards possible worlds that might take us beyond the conventions of current social, economic, or political systems, the profane seeks to undo the varied processes of subjectification that define the workings of any apparatus (an expansive term in Agamben’s reading). We will develop this distinction below, but the key point to note here is that while the speculative is always turned towards the future, the profane is ultimately concerned with unravelling and reconfiguring those innumerable ideas, practices, and phenomena inherited from the past that continue to structure the present. It is our contention that critical thinking in heritage and museums must embrace both these trajectories to envisage alternative forms of care and resilience fit for an era of rapid change and profound uncertainty.

To help ground this discussion, the chapter focuses on a recent project that aimed to rethink and reimagine heritage and museums in response to the climate crisis. Launched in May 2020, Reimagining Museums for Climate Action was developed as part of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council’s contribution to COP26, held in Glasgow in November 2021. The project began life as an international design and ideas competition—one that aimed to open the discussion around this subject to new publics and new constituents. Elsewhere, one of us (Harrison 2013) has drawn on the work of Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe in Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy (2009) to argue for the importance of hybrid forums in the establishment of more democratic models of decision making in heritage. By expanding the conversation around museums and climate action to include designers, artists, philosophers, Indigenous groups, activists, and others (alongside curators, scholars, and heritage practitioners), we hoped to unsettle the foundations of museological thinking and recognise alternative ways for heritage and museums to become engaged in the urgent project of building worlds and resourcing futures (see Bennett et al. 2017; Breithoff 2020; Harrison et al. 2020). An exhibition, website, and toolkit were produced to explore these themes, alongside an open-access book bringing together a multitude of ideas and perspectives on possible futures for the field (Harrison and Sterling 2021). This chapter reflects on the project, with a view to retheorising heritage and museums in and for the climate change era.

**Museum Climates**

From Anchorage to Sydney, museums globally have mobilised in recent years to address the challenges of a warming world through curatorial work, collecting programmes, public engagement activities, and new development strategies that do not shy away from the profound consequences of the climate emergency (see Brophy and Wylie 2013; Cameron and Neilson 2014; Newell, Robin and Wehner 2016; L’Internationale 2016). At the same time, a broad range of initiatives have sought to test the familiar idea of the museum in direct response to the climate crisis. These include activist-oriented climate museums in New York and the UK, but also the proposed Museum for the United Nations, whose first project—My Mark, My City—aimed to galvanise climate action in communities around the world. Alongside these, we cannot fail to mention the urgent work of protest groups such as Culture Unstained and BP or Not BP?, who seek to end fossil fuel sponsorship across the cultural sector. As the editors of the volume Ecologising Museums note, ‘the museum’ is not just a ‘technical operation, but is also imbued with a certain (modern) mindset which itself raises questions of sustainability’ (L’Internationale 2016: 5). Acknowledging the pervasiveness of this mindset leads to an important follow-up question: ‘To what degree are the core activities of collecting, preserving and presenting in fact attitudes that embody an unsustainable view of the world and the relationship between man [sic] and nature?’ (ibid). Reimagining Museums for Climate Action aimed to explore this further through participatory and design-led enquiry: an approach that still seems lacking in much critical work in the field.

In developing the project we were also inspired by a growing sub-field of climate related publications in museums studies, including three special issues on the subject in 2020 alone (Davis 2020; Sutton and Robinson 2020; Þórsson and Nørskov 2020). The breadth of case studies, creative interventions, and conceptual approaches found across this literature provides a valuable overview of the manifold ways in which museums intersect with climate action. Some of the main dimensions of this work include the idea that museums are ‘trusted spaces’ in which different publics can engage with the science of climate change (Cameron, Hodge and Salazar 2013); the possibility for collections—especially natural history collections—to inform new approaches to biodiversity conservation (McGhie 2019a); the need for museums to promote alternative forms of consumption (Arfvidsson and Follin 2020); the opportunities for cross-cultural engagement that may emerge around specific objects and narratives related to climate change (Newell, Robin, and Wehner 2016); and the potential to break down the boundaries between nature and culture through different modes of conservation and curating (Þórsson 2018). What such work highlights most clearly is the fact there is no single pathway or theory of change for the sector in relation to climate issues—addressing this crisis involves new imaginaries, new practices, new concepts, and new strategic alliances.

There are important parallels and intersections here with initiatives that aim to address the ongoing role of museums and heritage in supporting systemic forms of racism and inequality. In the UK and the US, campaign groups and forums such as Museum Detox, Museums Are Not Neutral, Museum as Muck, and Decolonize This Place have drawn attention to the historical and contemporary injustices of the field in ways that often coalesce with the political dimensions of climate action. Such work helps to surface the dense entanglement of museums with many of the forces that have brought the planet to the brink of ecological collapse, not least colonialism and the extractivist methods of industrial capitalism. Museums have never been isolated from the injustices of the world, but their complicity in a range of oppressive and damaging structures is now being thrown into sharp focus on multiple fronts.

This brings us to an important point in understanding the roots of the RMCA project, which at its core aimed to inspire radical change in museums to address the climate crisis. The key point here is that, in many ways, this change is already upon us. As authors such as Timothy Morton (2013), David Wallace-Wells (2019), and Andreas Malm (2018) highlight, the climate crisis is more than simply a problem to be overcome so that we can get back to business as usual—it is, potentially, a knowledge system or condition as all-encompassing as modernity or postmodernity. Such a perspective recognises that the impacts of climate change are felt not just in rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, and other environmental consequences, but in psychic experience, cultural responses, business, politics, and our relationship to time and history (Wallace-Wells 2019: 155; Malm 2018: 11). This is the change museums are currently navigating, just as much as they are confronting the damaging effects of a warming world. This vastly expands the scope of museological ‘reimagining,’ which in our view can no longer be left to museologists alone.

Here it should be noted that speaking generally about museums is a foolhardy task. Despite sharing a common genealogy and being united (to some degree) through international networks and ‘best practice’ guidelines, the sheer diversity of museums globally works against universalising definitions. As anthropologist James Clifford wrote some time ago, museum practices have proven remarkably ‘mobile’ and ‘productive’ in different locations around the world (1997: 217). Clifford traces this malleability to the various ways in which museums echo and formalise vernacular activities of collecting and display, arguing that processes of accumulation and exhibition are ‘a very widespread human activity not limited to any class or cultural group’ (ibid). As Clifford suggests, Within broad limits, a museum can accommodate different systems of accumulation and circulation, secrecy and communication, aesthetic, spiritual and economic value. How its “public” or “community” is defined, what individual, group, vision, or ideology it celebrates, how it interprets the phenomena it presents, how long it remains in place, how rapidly it changes – all these are negotiable. (ibid: 218) Responding to this heterogeneity, attempts to define the term museum always encounter difficulty because—as Fiona Candlin and Jamie Larkin put it in a recent article—museums are ‘different all the way down’ (2020: 123). They are typically ‘composite venues’ with ‘multiple, interlocking identities’ (ibid), ranging from education and research to recreation and fine dining. The sector as a whole also comprises different types of organisations that ‘intersect in nonpredictable and complex ways’ (ibid). This is something museologist Robert Janes identifies as a strength of the field, with the ‘vast network’ of museums globally seen to offer ‘untold potential for nurturing both museum and societal renewal’ (2009: 180). Clearly our desire to ‘reimagine museums’ picks up on this potentiality, but it also asks for a deeper questioning of ‘the museum’ as a specific form of institution or entity.

For Janes, the contemporary museum field may be understood as a kind of global ‘franchise’ in the same vein as McDonald’s or Starbucks, only ‘it is self-organised, has no corporate head office, no board of directors, no global marketing expenses, and is trusted and respected’ (ibid: 179). This optimistic picture needs to be offset however by acknowledging the precarity of individual institutions and of the museum workforce. An international survey of museums undertaken by ICOM discovered that almost 95% of museums had been forced to close temporarily during the first wave of the pandemic (ICOM 2020; see also UNESCO 2020). In the UK, while only nine museums closed permanently in 2020 (Candlin 2021)2, pandemic resulted in over 4,000 proposed or confirmed redundancies across the sector (Kendall Adams 2021). These stark figures remind us that the ‘resilience’ and adaptability of the sector all-too-often relies on a staffing model built around volunteering, low pay and casual contracts.3

We remained mindful of these concerns as we developed the brief for the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action competition, which explicitly sought to expand the conversation around the future of museums. A number of different research trajectories came together in co-authoring the brief, including Henry McGhie’s policy-oriented work on museums and the Sustainable Development Goals (McGhie 2019b), Harrison’s speculative approach to heritage as a future-making practices (Harrison 2013, 2015, Harrison et al. 2020), and Sterling’s interest in critical-creative design practices in heritage and museums (Sterling 2019, 2020). While these trajectories overlap in some ways, the gaps and tensions between research that is quite theoretical in outlook and work that is more concerned with policy and practice created a useful foundation for thinking holistically about museums and climate action. To this end, the brief encompassed issues of collecting, conservation and exhibition making, the links between decolonisation and decarbonisation, the need to challenge foundational principles, the desire for speculative ideas about what museums could be, and the relationship between museums and climate justice. As an activity linked to the UK’s hosting of COP26 in Glasgow, the brief also paid particular attention to the various UN programmes connected to museums, including Action for Climate Empowerment. Indeed, developing the competition brief constituted a kind of participatory thought experiment, bringing to mind architect Jeremy Till’s comments on the brief writing process: The creative brief is about negotiating a new set of social relations, it is about juxtapositions of actions and activities, it is about the possibility to think outside the norm, in order to project new spatial, and hence social, conditions. This process of evolving a brief may not provide the immediate rush of visual stimulation that is associated with the creative design of an object … but it does have a much longer-term and profound effect. (2009: 169) While it is too early to claim any such long-term effects, the intersecting problems the brief aimed to address explicitly sought to ‘think outside the norm’ to develop new spatial and social conditions. More specifically, we aimed to push forwards critical and creative thinking in a number of key areas. First, by recognising that museums are densely entangled with the problem of climate change, we sought to underline the need for an epistemic shift in museological thinking and practice to bring about meaningful climate action. Second, by highlighting the manifold ways in which museums are to some extent already embedded in the work of climate action, we hoped to draw together disparate strategies and approaches from across the sector. Third, by expanding the conversation around this problem to those outside the rather narrow field of ‘museum studies,’ we sought to encourage transdisciplinary perspectives and imaginaries. Finally, by embracing design as a creative methodology for the field, the project as a whole aimed to challenge preconceptions about what a museum could or should be.

The competition attracted over 500 expressions of interest, resulting in 264 submissions from 48 countries around the world. Eight teams were then invited to be part of an exhibition at Glasgow Science Centre, the official ‘Green Zone’ for COP26. The exhibitors included established designers, curators, academics, sound artists, digital specialists, Indigenous filmmakers, emerging architectural practices, and museum managers—a good example of the transdisciplinary conversations and alliances required to ‘reimagine’ museums in any meaningful way. The international scope of the competition also underlined the fact critical and creative thinking about museums often involves moving between different scales and contexts, from the hyper-local to the planetary, from city centres to forest ecosystems. As a compendium of possible futures, the ideas presented in the exhibition (and the ‘further concepts’ available on the project website) opened a range of alternative pathways for the museum field. In the rest of this chapter, we sketch out the main implications of this work around the two key themes of speculation and profanation: an alignment that offers valuable lessons in the need for creation and imagination to be part of critical museological thinking.

**Speculative Worlds**

The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination. (Ghosh 2016: 9)

What does it mean to understand precarity as an ‘earthwide condition,’ as Anna Tsing invites us to do in her multi-species ethnography The Mushroom at the End of the World? (2015: 5) What do we gain from this planetary (re)alignment, and what might it obscure? For Tsing precarity is the ‘condition of being vulnerable to others,’ a relational state in which ‘we are thrown into shifting assemblages’ and ‘everything is in flux, including our ability to survive’ (ibid: 20). Risk, endangerment, and loss all flourish in precarious times. But so too does indeterminacy: the sense that other futures might be possible. As banners held aloft at climate marches around the world attest: BUSINESS AS USUAL IS KILLING US ALL. ‘Earthwide’ precarity shares something with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s ‘negative universal history,’ which calls for a ‘global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity’ (2009: 222), but it also means embracing what Tsing describes as the ‘patchy unpredictability’ of our current condition (2016: 5). If precarity can be understood as the realisation—sometimes slow, sometimes sudden—that we can no longer rely on the status quo, then it is also a moment in which thinking beyond current parameters becomes the very opposite of abstract or introspective. When business as usual means crisis without end, imagining otherwise becomes an urgent ask of collective repair and resilience.

As Amitav Ghosh writes in his searing book The Great Derangement, the climate crisis is shadowed by a broader ‘imaginative and culture failure’ (2016: 8), one in which art and literature can be seen to have capitulated with the narratives of progress and individualism that undergird industrial modernity. Indeed, the ‘derangement’ Ghosh outlines is as much about the conventions and orthodoxies of certain cultural practices as it is about biodiversity loss, a warming climate, melting permafrost, or rising sea levels. Early in his book Ghosh poses the following thought experiment to tease out the strangeness of this situation: In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museum-goers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they – what can they – do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognising the realities of their plight? Quite possibly, then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement. (2016: 11)

A question that lingered at the back of our minds as we developed the Reimagining Museums project was this: to what extent might heritage and museums constitute a ‘mode of concealment’ in the same vein as art and literature? For museums in particular, this question opens up an important counternarrative that challenges the centrality of display, education, and knowledge production to the field. While individual museums may seek to ‘tell the story’ of climate change, the broader social and cultural frameworks in which museological thinking and practice are embedded can equally be understood as a manifestation of the Great Derangement. This raises an interesting problem for imagining ‘museum-goers’ of the future, as Ghosh asks us to do in the above passage. Most people who embark on this mental journey are likely to conjure a very particular idea of the museum—most likely a temple-like structure in which objects and texts are arranged for contemplative enjoyment and edification. For us, this vision is misguided. Museum-goers of the future—if they exist at all—will not look at ‘our’ time and ‘our’ culture in this way, because the very model of the museum that such a space evokes may be considered part of the Great Derangement.

New models and new museological imaginaries are required to escape this predicament. Speculative design offers one way of thinking through such imaginaries. In their book Speculative Everything, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby note that speculative design is not about predicting the future but is rather a strategy for using design to ‘open all sorts of possibilities that can be discussed, debated, and used to collectively define a preferable future for a given group of people’ (2013: 6). Such an approach ‘thrives on imagination’ (ibid: 2) and recognises that critique must move beyond negativity. In Dunne and Raby’s words, speculative design can be ‘a gentle refusal, a turning away from what exists, a longing, wishful thinking, a desire, and even a dream’ (ibid: 34). While this strategy calls on people to think beyond the limitations of current social, economic, and technological systems, it is also grounded in and responsive to the complexities of the present. Indeed, speculative design specifically aims to open up new perspectives on socalled wicked problems—complex issues that seem to have no easy solution such as climate change.

Many of the proposals submitted to the Reimagining Museums competition exemplified this approach. Museum of Open Windows, for example—a collaborative project developed by Livia Wang, Nico Alexandroff, RESOLVE Collective (Akil Scafe-smith, Seth Scafe-smith, Melissa Haniff), and Studio MASH (Max Martin, Angus Smith, Conor Sheehan)—imagined a networked infrastructure of repurposed museums enabling citizens and communities to care for the planet. As their project description states:

Rather than document faraway places … the Museum of Open Windows focuses attention on the nearby and the particular. The museum in this context takes the form of an audio Field Guide directing people on a guided walk of their local environment, encouraging the listener to engage directly with the ecosystem they inhabit and identify signs of a warming climate. With access to expertise and equipment, a community group might “open a window” onto their world by providing realtime footage of a landscape or industrial activity, to be accessed and shared globally with other communities online. They will be able to share quantitative information on water, soil and air quality, as well as more subjective accounts of their environments, redressing the predominance of cold scientific data in this field. Crucially, by ‘uncoupling’ the idea of the museum from a specific building or site, the Museum of Open Windows asks how communities worldwide might research, catalogue, and ultimately care for their own distinct terrains. The speculative in this context can be understood as a gesture of hybridisation and recrafting. As Dunne and Raby put it, designing for possible futures means embracing ‘the many tools available for crafting not only things but also ideas—fictional worlds, cautionary tales, what-if scenarios, thought experiments, counterfactuals, reductio ad absurdum experiments, prefigurative futures’ (2013: 3). The Field Guide produced by the Museum of Open Windows team is one such thought experiment, brought to reality in the here-and-now to help imagine what could be.

Weathering With Us by Isabella Ong and Tan Wen Jun—another proposal submitted to the competition—also evokes the capacity for speculative design to push museums in an entirely new direction. In this case, the museum is a building, only one that might act as a beacon of hope and healing for the planet. Represented as a scale model in the exhibition in Glasgow, Weathering With Us imagines a new kind of museum architecture functioning as a huge, rotating sand ‘clock,’ with a mechanical armature that etches patterns onto a circular sandy landscape. As their project description states, the sand in this scenario is ground olivine, a volcanic mineral found abundantly in the Earth’s subsurface: When seawater meets olivine, a chemical reaction occurs that pulls carbon dioxide out of the air and the carbon finds its way to the bottom of the sea as the shells and backbones of molluscs and corals, stored as carbon deposits. This process, mineral weathering, constitutes one of the Earth’s natural mechanisms to regulate its carbon level and functions as an important carbon sink. Rotating over a 24-hour cycle, the museum building in this concept would inscribe data patterns onto the sand-scape, from carbon emissions and pollution indexes to meteorological data, translated into a ‘collective fingerprint of our actions.’ The building itself—the ‘armature’—would be split into two parts. On one side, the programmatic functions of a typical museum: galleries, research centres, and a café. On the other, a kinetic mechanism engraving the sand through a maze of walls constantly actuating up and down: ‘The experience of walking through this perpetually shifting (albeit very slowly) sand-filled maze would be a contemplative one, as visitors weave around the walls, watching as the sand trickles by on the ground.’ This is a fantastical project to be sure, but in this unviability lies a serious message about the potential for museum buildings themselves to be both spaces of poetic reflection and technologies of climate repair, in this case actively removing carbon from the atmosphere.

Understanding museums through the framework of speculative design means challenging the assumptions and orthodoxies guiding work in this field, from narrow concepts of what counts as a museum building to taken-for-granted expectations about how and what museums should collect. Such rethinking is intrinsically oriented towards experimental forms of museological practice—an approach that seems all the more urgent in the face of profound social and environmental change. We should remember however that climate change is also a historical concern. As Malm puts it, ‘the storm of climate change draws its force from countless acts of combustion over … the past two centuries’ (2018: 5). Precarity may end up being a fertile ground to explore possible future worlds, but this must not be at the expense of a deep questioning of what has come before. It is here that the concept of profanation becomes particularly relevant to our own project of ‘reimagining’ heritage and museums.

FIGURE 5.1 Existances by Jairza Fernandes Rocha da Silva, Nayhara J. A. Pereira, Thiers Vieira, João Francisco Vitório Rodrigues, Natalino, Neves da Silva and Walter Francisco Figueiredo Lowande, one of the displays in the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action exhibition at Glasgow Science Centre, overlooking the main venue for COP26. Photograph by Jonathan Gardner for RMCA.

**Profane Museologies**

Profanation shares a certain irreverence with speculative thinking, but it moves towards rebellion and dissent rather than subtle reorganisation or redesign. While this attitude has a particular resonance with work that aims to challenge the templelike design and experience of museum buildings (see Duncan 1991), our use of the term engages with a broader understanding of ‘the museum’ as an ontological category.

As we noted earlier, museums resist easy definition. They are composite and multiple, and embrace a multitude of agendas, narratives, and positionalities. Recognising this heterogeneity, we contend that to understand (and potentially redirect) the work museums perform in the world we must first place them under the much broader heading of ‘apparatus,’ a term Foucault identifies as a ‘kind of historical formation, so to speak, that at a given historical moment has as its major function the response to an urgency’ (in Agamben 2009: 3). Foucault gathers an expansive set of material and discursive phenomena under this heading, including ‘institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions’ (ibid). In his essay What Is an Apparatus? Agamben somehow extends this even further, arguing that an apparatus can be ‘literally anything that has the capacity to capture, orient, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions or discourses of living beings’ (ibid: 14). Here Agamben draws together traditionally Foucauldian spaces such as the prison, the asylum, the school, the panopticon, and the factory with more diffuse processes such as writing, literature, agriculture, and navigation. Apparatuses in this sense are not ‘a mere accident in which humans are caught by chance, but rather are rooted in the very process of “humanization” that made “humans” out of the animals’ (ibid: 16). This is because the central purpose of apparatuses for Agamben is subjectification: the procedure by which a subject may be led to observe, analyse, interpret, and recognise itself as ‘a domain of possible knowledge’ (Stewart and Roy 2014). It hardly needs stating that there are clear links here with Tony Bennett’s understanding of the civilising work of museums in the nineteenth century, which explicitly sought to create subjects of nation and empire (Bennet 1995).

While Foucault defined his own work as an attempt to create ‘a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (1982: 777), Agamben again goes further, suggesting that the incessant process of subjectification effectively separates the world into two vast ontological categories: On the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured. On one side … lies the ontology of creatures, and on the other side … apparatuses that seek to govern and guide them toward the good. (ibid: 13)

Ontologically then—and recognising the vast proliferation of museum-like institutions over the past two centuries—museums may be understood as a particularly successful type of apparatus: a mode of ‘capturing’ and producing subjects that have been deployed, appropriated, and mobilised in diverse contexts around the world (see Harrison 2013). As Clifford argued, ‘aspirations of both dominant and subaltern populations can be articulated through this structure, along with the material interests of national and transnational tourism’ (1997: 218). As apparatuses of subjectification, museums may serve many purposes, from buttressing the nation-state and civilising populations to fostering debate and nurturing new ways of being in the world. Understanding museums in this way does not offer a tidy definition of what a museum is, but it does help us to grasp the broader implications of historic and contemporary museological praxis. Apparatuses are both ubiquitous and materially specific. They are strategic and concrete interventions that speak to particular relations of power and knowledge. Placing museums in this ontological category helps us to recognise that while they may be put to many different purposes, museums cannot be disentangled from the broader processes of subjectification that model and contaminate ‘the life of individuals’ (Agamben 2009: 15). It is here that Agamben’s related concept of ‘profanation’ becomes important. For Agamben, apparatuses serve to remove things from ‘common use’ (ibid: 17), a term that implies openness and collective possibility. Combatting apparatuses therefore means ‘liberating’ that which remains captured and separated, a process Agamben explains through the Roman idea of profanation. While ‘consecration’ designated ‘the exit of things from the sphere of human law, “to profane” signified, on the contrary, to restore the thing to the free use of men’ (ibid: 18). Such language obviously echoes museological debates around restitution and repatriation, but there is also something much broader at stake in this conceptualisation.

To profane museums is to call their very status as apparatuses into question with a view to disentangling the varied partitions and sacrifices they embody and make manifest. As Agamben puts it, ‘profanation is the counterapparatus that restores to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided’ (ibid: 19). The idea of ‘restoring’ (or indeed never capturing) objects and subjects of knowledge surfaced across many of the concepts submitted to the Reimagining Museums competition, from proposals to ‘rewild’ the museum to new models of distributed collecting. Perhaps the clearest evocation of what we are calling profanation can be found in DESIGN EARTH’s animated film Elephant in the Room, however. This allegorical tale—created by Rania Ghosn, El Hadi Jazairy, Monica Hutton, and Anhong Li, and narrated by Donna Haraway—imagines one of the stuffed elephants in the American Museum of Natural History coming to life and rampaging through the streets of New York to demand climate justice. In profaning the famous displays of the Akeley Hall of African Mammals, the film invites a ‘critical revision of the museum’s myriad entanglements with extractivist environmental histories, which have constructed worlds (and worldviews) that perpetuate division, dispossession and violence’ (Ghosn et al. 2021: 121). The film’s playful and irreverent approach masks a complex message about the need for alternative myths and fables for the climate change era; what the DESIGN EARTH team call a ‘praxis of care and response’ (ibid). The elephant in this sense profanes the museum to undo its own capture, but also to make visible the very workings of the museum as an apparatus of subjectification. By the end of the film, only the façade of the museum remains: a vast counter-apparatus designed to inspire meaningful climate action.

**Conclusions: Modelling Action**

Climate change teaches us that cultural, technological, and economic formations are densely interwoven with the atmosphere, which in turn impacts on political and social life at every scale (Guattari 1989). This feedback loop also means that climate action can take many forms. Project Drawdown for example identifies a wide variety of ‘solutions’ to the climate crisis, ranging from the protection of ecosystems to the improvement of health and education across society (Hawken 2017). Typically, the rhetoric of climate action focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, mitigating against further climate breakdown, and adapting to the challenges of a warming world. Some actions test or exceed these boundaries, however. Economic sanctions, lobbying, civil disobedience, mass strikes, and—for some—withdrawal from the social and political systems that have created the crisis all expand the meaning and scope of ‘climate action.’ The museum sector already contributes to this work in a number of ways. New museum buildings celebrate their sustainable credentials; curatorial programmes seek to educate people about the causes and consequences of climate change; collecting activities highlight stories of environmental loss and resilience. As heterogeneous sites of cultural production and consumption, museums have also become key battlegrounds in debates over climate inaction. The scope for ‘reimagining’ museums is therefore wide-ranging and—for some—daunting. When so much is at stake it becomes increasingly difficult to identify specific points where meaningful change can be enacted and measured.

Rather than shy away from this prodigious task, we prefer to expand the contours of the challenge even further. Reimagining museums for climate action is not, ultimately, about museums themselves. It is about the wider social and environmental conditions that museums emerge from and feed back into. The speculative and profane futures we advocate for do not stop at the threshold of the museum (whatever form this might take). Instead, ‘rethinking’ work in this field should be undertaken primarily in response to—and as an impetus for—further radical change across society. While this may seem like a responsibility museums are ill-equipped to take on, it is our contention that modelling change in this field has the potential to shift debates around climate action more widely. Somewhat paradoxically, this is because museums are so deeply connected to the emergence of climate change in the first place. If more just and sustainable futures can be imagined for this field—a field which, we must remember, continues to support and maintain various forms of oppression linked to colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and nationalism—then the scale and urgency of climate action might be brought into sharper focus for an even broader range of social and political apparatuses.

In this light, reimagining museums for climate action becomes an almost impossibly varied project of material, social, cultural, political, economic, and institutional change. At the level of material and spatial infrastructures, questions of recycling, adaptive reuse, and carbon reduction come to the fore. At the level of systems and policies, new methods of recruitment and governance may be required to enact meaningful change. As inherently relational entities, thinking about museums as catalysts for climate action asks us to consider the extent to which they are embedded in local communities, or networked with each other across regional, national, and planetary scales. Finally, as spaces of experience, education, and narrative, museums have a crucial role to play in shifting subjectivities, which may include challenging individualised and all-too human notions of this concept. And, of course, all of these are connected from the very outset, feeding into one another in expected and unforeseen ways.

What we also find across much of this work is a recognition—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—that the emergence and spread of museums around the world tracks the rise of carbon emissions and environmental degradation in ways that can no longer be ignored. This realisation offers a useful corrective to the optimistic reading of museums as a diverse global phenomenon mentioned earlier. While the global museum ‘franchise’ described by Janes may be seen as a valuable tool in the fight against climate change on one hand, it can also be read as an artefact of

the Industrial Revolution, or of colonialism, or the Great Acceleration. Museums are being called into question in this moment of crisis precisely because they can be seen as both an instrument and a legacy of the processes that have led to Earthwide precarity. Even as they celebrate and promote their capacity to protect, conserve, and ‘care for’ the planet, museums also embody and in some cases perpetuate the Great Derangement that undergirds climate breakdown. The collective, participatory, and speculative approach developed for the Reimagining Museums project provides one example of the kind of transdisciplinary thinking required to overcome this situation, but this should also leave space for something deeper, something that gets at the profound divisions and separations enacted by the museum as an apparatus of subjectification. Agamben’s notion of the profane offers one way to think through this epistemic and ontological shift.

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**Notes**

1 In the wake of Agamben’s comments on the pandemic, we are mindful of revisiting his

work in this context, but we continue to find some purchase in his re-reading of Foucault,

even if his much broader biopolitical project must now be called into question.

2 As Candlin notes, this number is significantly less than in previous years (there were 26

permanent closures in 2017 and 16 in 2018), and only one of the closures in 2020 can be

linked to the COVID crisis. Emergency funding from the UK government made it

possible for most museums to survive the pandemic.

3 Recognising the ways in which this situation hit BAME heritage and museum workers

particularly hard, Museum Detox, the UK-based organisation representing museum and

heritage professionals who identify as people of colour, established a hardship fund to

provide micro-grants to support its members during the pandemic ( Museum Detox 2020).

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