

**The
Delirious
Museum**

**A Journey
from the
Louvre to
Las Vegas**

**Calum
Storrie**

'It's a game that moves
as you play. Using a host
of well-chosen references,
Calum Storrie puts
cultural history in his pipe
and smokes it. Enjoy...'

Gavin Turk

LILT AUMIS

The Delirious Museum

'*The Delirious Museum* brilliantly explores the idea of the museum as a place of disorder, a space for wandering and dreaming, from Baudelaire to the surrealists, from the situationists to the Centre Pompidou, from Carlo Scarpa to Sir John Soane.'

Charles Saumarez Smith

'Importantly, Calum Storrie's delirious museum allows for the museum to be a critical force for change. *The Delirious Museum* is thus a valuable contribution to museological and architectural studies. It will also be of value to those interested in the history of exhibition design. Befitting Storrie's passion for his subject, the twelve chapters of the book are well-researched, intriguing, and frequently entertaining.'

Janice Baker, *Museum and Society*

'Besides the leaps in imagination that give intellectual form to *The Delirious Museum*, Storrie's achievement is bringing all of the cultural references to the party. The reader is free to reacquaint themselves with a familiar crowd or find new associations. Like a well-designed show, Storrie's book is inclusive and illuminating. His observations gleam with a rare authority.'

Richard Hubert Smith, *Blueprint*

'I am very enthusiastic about this book. It puts forward a very interesting view of the idea of the museum. It is fresh and original, and written with verve.'

Mel Gooding

'Storrie offers excellent value to the armchair traveller.'

Timothy Mason, *Museums Journal*

The Delirious Museum:

A JOURNEY FROM THE LOUVRE
TO LAS VEGAS

Calum Storrie

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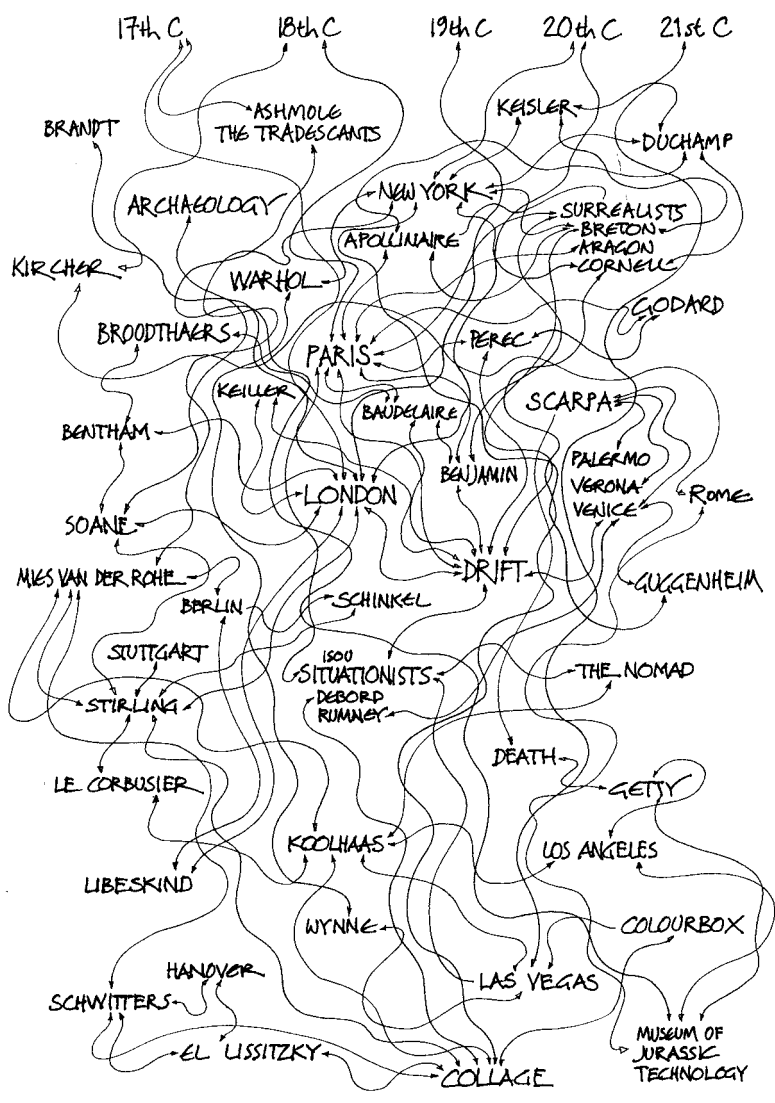
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For my father, NORMAN STORRIE
and in memory of my mother, MARY



I. The Delirious Museum

INTRODUCTION

Museums should be invisible. I like art works and institutions that escape any physical presence. Things you can carry in your mind or in your pockets. It's not a matter of laziness or frustration: maybe it's a form of asceticism. With an imaginary museum you can do whatever you want, you can think about it before falling asleep, or you can go out in the morning and build it from scratch. And if it doesn't work, there is nothing to be ashamed of. You can always say that it was simply an exercise in loss. In the end, I just think there is a certain strength in being invisible.

Maurizio Cattelan¹

The title of this work has two sources. One source is an essay called 'The Delirious Museum', by David Mellor, in a book of photographs by David Ross.² Mellor discusses the photographs in the context of two texts. The first of these is by Jacques Derrida and deals with the way in which the 'frame' insinuates itself into the view of the object. The second text discussed by Mellor is Theodor Adorno's *The Valéry-Proust Museum* which examines how the spectator is drawn into an intimate relationship with the displayed object through the paraphernalia of the immediate museum environment.

The second source for the title is *Delirious New York* by Rem Koolhaas. This is described by the author as a '*retroactive manifesto* for Manhattan'.³ Koolhaas' book could also be seen as a selective, maverick history of New York. This book predates Koolhaas' involvement with museum architecture and is a paean of praise to the urban condition exemplified by the 'Downtown Athletic Club' with its fictional representation of naked 'metropolitan bachelors' wearing boxing gloves and eating oysters.

I first began to unearth the Delirious Museum in a conversation with colleagues some years ago. We were discussing the pros and

cons of museum admission charges. This is a discussion that for peculiar political and historical reasons might only occur in Britain. I am in favour of free admission to museums and I was then. At the time there was a split between museums in London over this issue; the British Museum, the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery all had free entry; the 'South Kensington' museums: the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum, all charged for entry. I defended my position by saying that 'museums should be a continuation of the street'. I did not mean that they should have to compete with the street in terms of their speed of communication or that they should appeal to passers-by in the same way as, say, a shop or a games arcade. Instead, I was suggesting that there should be ease of access to both building and collection that in effect integrates them into the life of the city. This premise has led me to look in more detail at the relationship between museum and city. In some ways any city is a Delirious Museum: a place overlaid with levels of history, a multiplicity of situations, events and objects open to countless interpretations. If there was a single starting point for this train of thought it would be Christopher Alexander's essay from the 1960s, 'A City is not a Tree', in which he describes the city as a 'semilattice' of interconnections and overlaps.⁴ The Delirious Museum that I will examine has continuity with the street and it aspires to the condition of the city. What I want to do is to reclaim the museum on behalf of the city and vice versa. By shifting the perception of the collection and the container – for want of a better word, the 'architecture' – it is possible to re-evaluate the relationship between museum and city in terms of shared experience.

Most cities have evolved over a long period of time and they have often done so with very little control. The museum, however, is traditionally associated with order and classification. 'Neutral' taxonomic systems have been used as a means of 'clarification' and education. Often this neutrality has meant limiting, either by accident or by design, the possible interpretations of the museum. I argue that it is possible to subvert this position.

All museums carry within them the seed of their own delirium. To a greater or lesser degree they can be re-interpreted in terms of the breakdown of control and classification. This can happen in a number

of ways: an obsessive level of control can be self-subverting, while its opposite, a state of chaos, can up-end perceived notions of the museum. Messiness, category confusion, theatricality, elaborate historical layering and museological fictionalizing can, singly or in combination, go towards creating the Delirious Museum. It is as if some of the museums I describe are about to loose their grip on their contents and themselves. When asked by the curators of the Palais de Tokyo the question 'What do you expect from an art institution in the 21st century?' one participant said 'Cheap, fast and out of control'.⁵ This description applies equally to the Delirious Museum and to the delirious city.

In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi wrote:

I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non-sequitur and proclaim the duality. I am for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning; for the implicit function as well as the explicit function. I prefer 'both-and' to 'either-or', black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white.⁶

The Delirious Museum does not replace the museums that we know; it exists in parallel to the museum as it has evolved. It brings a new level of 'messy vitality' and 'richness of meaning' to the museum.

I confess to an anxiety that the Delirious Museum cannot be made; that it can *only* be brought into existence retroactively and it is, in effect, a construction of nostalgia. Perhaps it is the re-realization of the museum that transforms it, that makes it *delirious*. Acknowledging this, I have tried to prove that the Delirious Museum *can* be designed and constructed. So my study moves from 'history' to contemporary architecture and back again. My own background is as an architect who designs exhibitions. I have worked in a number of the museums discussed, most notably the British Museum,⁷ so many of the observations made are based on an intimate knowledge of particular places. In creating exhibitions, I have been aware of the way these ephemeral events pass into the history of a place. I see the exhibitions I have designed as experiments where unpredictable ingredients are combined. Sometimes the result is quiet resolution and sometimes the consequences of the combination are explosive. By extension these experiments are part of the life of the city too.

What is the Delirious Museum of the title? It is something both built and unbuilt. It *inheres* in certain buildings and museums, in some artworks, and some unplanned city spaces. The Delirious Museum is nebulous and slippery. It is a parasitical idea found in the fabric of cities, in urban practices and fragments, that is, in *space*. But you also find it in *narratives*, both in and out of time – in fictional fragments, in historical anecdote and near-forgotten detail.

This book weaves together myths, histories and buildings. It tracks the Delirious Museum first as an idea that is embodied in several forms – chapters that are, respectively, a story, a theory, a laboratory, a collection and a walk. The idea of the Delirious Museum is ‘grown’ in the first six chapters, like a culture in a lab. In the Petri dish in the lab it looks very different from how it will appear later in the book, out there in the world, in the built environment. In the lab the microscope takes the familiar and magnifies it into the strange and mysterious.

Yet once it does move out into the world, it is no less strange and mysterious, merely differently so. Subsequent chapters look at the Delirious Museum as architecture, not as a finished ‘thing’ but as a new mutation. Escaped from the lab, it settles into its new host, the building. There it mutates into several forms, all of which can go unnoticed – but, equally, can be perceived by the naked eye if you know where, or rather, how, to look. You need a different way of looking to access London of the 1800s, Paris of the 1840s, Las Vegas of the 1990s, and to tie these in with certain European artistic and architectural projects of the 20th and 21st centuries. You need historical knowledge and visual and conceptual acuity to see what is already there but that goes unnoticed, incognito, as if in a parallel universe.

All the forms that constitute the Delirious Museum also determine the form of the book. It is neither pure architectural analysis, nor urbanism, nor history nor literature alone; instead it weaves these forms together. Perhaps the book itself is a Delirious Museum mimicking what it describes, for it is, among other things, a repository of anecdotes and arcane facts. It is my collection.

If the Delirious Museum is first and foremost an idea, the second half of the book pursues the Delirious Museum from urbanism, image

and idea into architecture. Key practitioners include Soane, Scarpa and Libeskind. But the idea escapes again, makes its own way, and scuttles into the New World of the late 20th century – the rampant capitalism of Las Vegas via the global art brands of Guggenheim and Getty. This is not so different from the origins of the Delirious Museum in other moments and places of rapidly expanding consumer culture: Soane's London during the Industrial Revolution and mid-19th-century Paris.

The book suggests a historical moment in the development of capitalism and its offshoots after the Enlightenment as a conceptual framework for the context in which the Delirious Museum can lodge itself and grow in its various mutations – image, idea, architectural form, historical fragment, cemetery, department store, fiction, motel, museum, film or artwork. The Delirious Museum makes its way into the cracks and crevices of many aspects of commodity culture; there it lodges and grows in all its forms, in a parallel life but still dependent upon its 'host'.

The chapters are numbered in a conventional way but they can also be read as one might visit the rooms in a museum, visiting different collections of interest, doubling back, taking the shortest route or heading straight for a particular exhibit or the café (though I do not know which chapter that might be). I begin with a convulsive moment for Modernism, one of the events that make up the history of the Delirious Museum. In Chapters 2 and 3 I develop the ideas created in the preceding narrative in terms of a theoretical background. This is, in effect, my own 'manifesto' for the Delirious Museum and it will draw on a series of modernist views of the city: the flâneur, as identified by Baudelaire and theorized by Benjamin, Surrealism and the Situationists. Chapter 4 describes the ephemeral experiments of the early history of the Delirious Museum. Chapter 5 is a description of an imaginary museum devoted to the work of artists who worked or are working with the idea of the museum. Chapter 6 constructs, from existing fragments of a real city – London – an unstable and restless version of the Delirious Museum. Chapter 7 expands on the peculiarly interdependent relationship between the mausoleum and the museum, between the deathly and the displayed. Chapter 8 deals with the particular delirium induced by obsessive architectural (and curatorial) control as exhibited in

the work of Carlo Scarpa. The following chapter takes a broader view of the architecture of the museum in the 20th century. Chapter 10 is an examination of the work and ideas of Daniel Libeskind. Chapter 11 represents a geographical and historical shift to a relatively new city on the 'Pacific Rim', Los Angeles, and concentrates on two museums that exemplify separate museological tendencies. The first of these is the acropolis that is Richard Meier's Getty Center. In contrast, the second, the Museum of Jurassic Technology, almost disappears behind a Culver City shopfront. The final chapter tentatively suggests a re-reading of the fantastic urbanism of Las Vegas in terms of the Delirious Museum; a place containing both 'spectacle' and 'situation' and where the museum exists alongside the museum's antithesis.

I

THE LOUVRE: AN ABSENCE

Our civilization will leave to the future ages only its roundhouses and its railroad tracks. Scholars will perish trying to decipher the inscriptions.

Guillaume Apollinaire to Max Jacob¹

The snare

So much starts at the Louvre. This place is where the private collection, the *wunderkammer*, was transformed into the public museum. Although the idea of making the collection and the building accessible was mooted before 1789, this proposal came to nothing. It took the modern convulsion of revolution to bring the museum into existence. Within a few days of the setting up of the revolutionary government in 1789 a decree was passed to open the palace to the public. This duly happened on the first anniversary of the creation of the Republic. At the core of the collection are the riches of the aristocracy and the loot of France's imperial past. Baudelaire in his poem 'The Swan' speaks of seeing a confusion of bric-à-brac glittering through the windows of the Louvre, while outside in the street he watches the ridiculous wanderings of the creature escaped from a menagerie.² In Zola's novel *L'Assomoir* of 1876, the members of a wedding party, after much discussion about how to spend time on a rainy afternoon, take a walk round the museum en route from ceremony to banquet. Only one of the party has visited the Louvre before; the poverty of their lives has restricted them to a small geographical area around Barbès-Rochechouart. Inevitably, as those out of their class and out of their depth in Zola's moral tale, the visitors get lost in the museum:

'Seized with alarm and despondency, they wandered aimlessly through galleries, still in crocodile behind Monsieur Madinier, now mopping his brow and beside himself with rage against the authorities, whom he accused of having changed the position of the doors. Attendants and visitors watched them go past and marvelled.'³ The museum, brought into being with the best of intentions, has already become both labyrinth and snare.

In 1993 the American architect I. M. Pei completed the glass pyramid that now marks the entrance to the museum and to a subterranean shopping mall. The pyramid is the centre point of a re-development scheme called the Grand Louvre; it serves both as an entrance and as an organizational point for the whole complex, creating routes into the separate wings of the museum. The pyramid forms a hub that is meant to clarify the layout of the museum labyrinth. It is a comprehensible space that uses the architectural language, at its most luxurious, of the adjoining shopping mall. But the pyramid also has an inherent element of parody as befits an object created in the first flush of architectural post-modernism. Is it meant to reinforce the widely held view that all museums are tombs and that they are full of grave goods? Or is the intention to mock the imperial ambition, not just of Napoleon but of the Louvre itself? In its ghostly transparency it could even be read as parodying its own architectural antecedent. The pyramids of Egypt were meant to be impenetrable, not spaces at all but solid geometric artefacts. Even this architectural spectre has international influence: it is seen as a prototype for the re-organization of unruly national collections and their buildings. The British Museum in the creation of its Great Court has a similar ambition. A by-product of the pyramid is the way in which it has become possible to visit the Louvre without visiting the museum of the same name. The institution is thus magnified and made more pervasive in the minds of visitors. Simultaneously, the Louvre is made diffuse and colonises sections of the city intended for other activities. Some years before the construction of the pyramid, the Louvre colonized other bits of city such as the Metro station Louvre Rivoli. The platforms of the station were occupied by vitrines containing plaster copies of the artefacts. The walls, dressed in stone, featured niches within which could be glimpsed life-size photographs of exhibits. Today, in the tra-

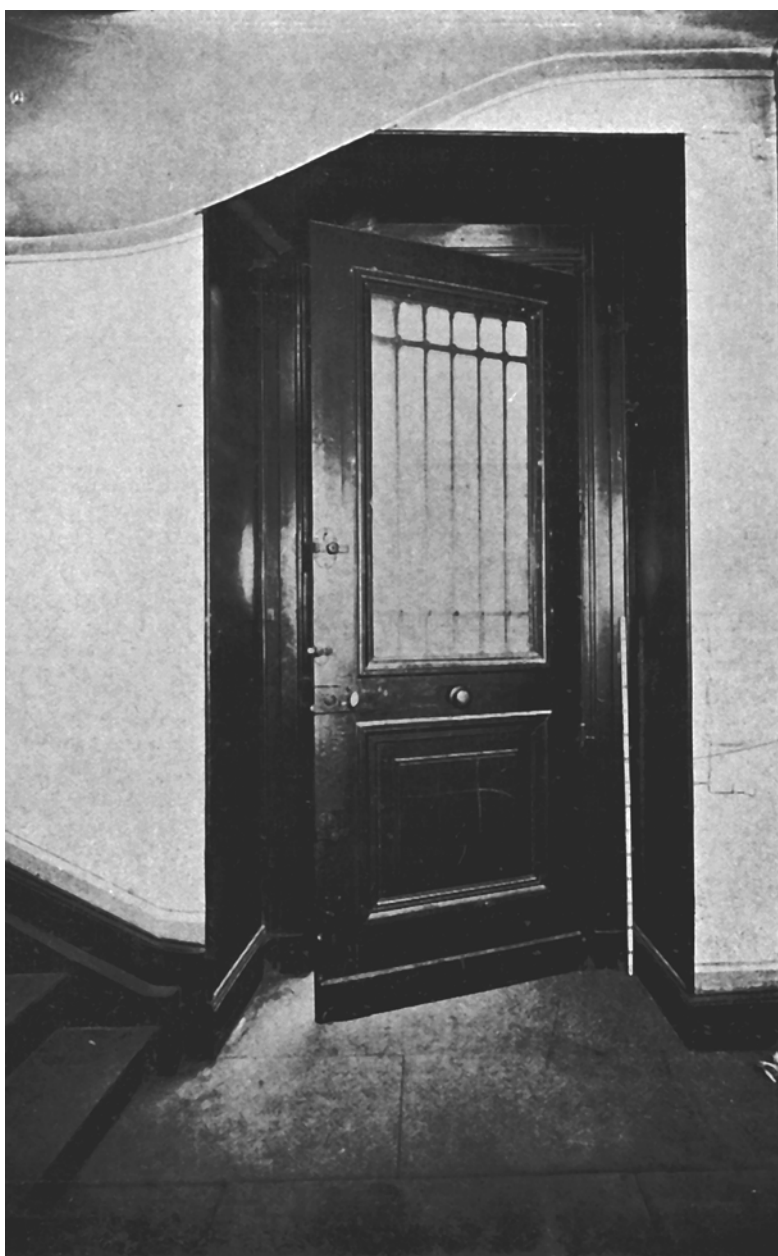
dition of out-moded and neglected museum display, the contents of the vitrines are looking faded and tired.

The space

Zola identified the seed of delirium in the labyrinth of the 19th-century Louvre but it was not until 1911 that this delirium took root in the museum. Not only is the Louvre among the first public museums, but it is one of the biggest and it contains artefacts with the status of cultural icons. The Venus de Milo and 'Mona Lisa' are, perhaps, the two most famous museum exhibits in the world. The fame of the latter was enhanced by its disappearance for two years. On the morning of 22 August 1911, the painter Louis Béroud entered the Salon Carré in order to make some sketches for a satirical painting of the recently glazed 'Mona Lisa'. He intended to show a fashionable *Parisienne* arranging her hair in the reflecting mirror of the glazed painting. Where the painting should have been there was a gap. The attendant suggested that the painting had been removed for photography. On investigation it emerged that 'Mona Lisa' was not in the photography studio and when the curator of the department of Egyptian Antiquities initiated a search it could not be found elsewhere in the building. By midday the police had sealed off the museum, allowing visitors out one by one. Eventually the glass and frame of the painting were discovered in a small access staircase but there was no trace of the painting itself.

Apollinaire imprisoned

In the end you are tired of that world of antiquity
 O Eiffel Tower shepherdess the bridges this morning are a bleating
 flock
 You have had enough of living in Greek and Roman antiquity . . .⁴



The moment at which the disappearance of 'Mona Lisa' was discovered also marked the beginning of a chain reaction of events that act as a metaphor for modernism's ambivalent relationship with the museum. The two main characters in this story, the artist Picasso and the poet Apollinaire, are bound up in the creation of modern art. There seems to be no agreed version of the events that preceded the arrest and imprisonment of Apollinaire. Opinions vary about the sequence of events surrounding the affair but they were certainly precipitated by the scandal not just of the theft of 'Mona Lisa' but of the ease with which it was taken from the gallery. Apollinaire's friend and sometimes secretary, G ry Pieret, had a history of stealing from the Louvre. He had a number of histories: at the time of the scandal he was not long returned from the Klondike Gold Rush and was still sporting yellow chaps and a stetson around Paris. Apollinaire portrayed him as 'Baron Ignace d'Ormesan' in *L'H r siarque et Cie*. Pieret subsequently adopted this title as his pseudonym. In 1907 he had acquired two Iberian statuettes that he subsequently passed to Picasso. Whether Picasso knew of the origin of the pieces is uncertain, but some versions of the story suggest that Picasso was told by Pieret to keep the sculptures secret. When 'Mona Lisa' went missing, Pieret returned another piece of sculpture that he had also stolen from the Louvre to a newspaper office as a publicity stunt and, ostensibly, to attract attention to lax security at the museum. Apollinaire had already published an article in *Paris-Journal* on the same subject, saying: 'The Louvre is less well protected than a Spanish Museum'.⁵ The sculpture that Pieret returned had sat on the mantelpiece of Apollinaire's apartment during Pieret's stay. Apollinaire, knowing of his friend's actions, thought that Pieret might also have stolen the famous painting and became worried that the statuettes held by Picasso would also come to light. Picasso, the Spaniard, and Apollinaire, born in Rome, were both already exercised by the possibility of being deported as aliens, and then decided to dispose of the incriminating pieces by throwing them into the Seine. On the night they had planned to do this, Apollinaire and Picasso spent the evening playing cards '... while they sat waiting for the fatal moment when they would set out for the Seine – "the moment of the crime" – they had pretended to play cards all evening, doubtless in imitation of certain

bandits they had read about'.⁶ Eventually they set off with the stolen statuettes in a suitcase. After walking the streets of Paris for a large part of the evening they abandoned the plan. Perhaps they felt guilty about disposing of something so valuable or perhaps the opportunity to drop the pieces quietly into the river did not present itself. In most accounts it was Apollinaire who, the next morning, took the statuettes to the same newspaper office previously visited by Pieret.⁷ A promise of secrecy was extracted as to who had delivered the statuettes. But the following day the police came to search Apollinaire's apartment, finding incriminating evidence regarding the Louvre statuettes. He was subsequently arrested for handling stolen property and for suspicion of involvement in the theft of 'Mona Lisa'.

A few days after the arrest of Apollinaire, Picasso was brought in by the police and under questioning he mysteriously denied that he even knew Apollinaire. Picasso was allowed to leave and was not charged. Apollinaire was eventually freed on a provisional basis and, after much agitation from influential friends, charges were dropped. But he was affected by his time in prison and although he and Picasso did not fall out, their friendship cooled. In his poem 'Zone' Apollinaire wrote:

Now you are in Paris at the examining magistrate's
They have placed you under arrest like a criminal⁸

In *L'Antitradition Futuriste*, a 'Manifeste-synthèse' issued in Milan on 29 June 1913 in support of the Italian Futurists, Apollinaire offered a 'Rose' to his many artist friends and 'MER . . . DE . . .' to: 'Académismes . . . Historiens . . . Musées . . .'. In this, he may have been venting his spleen against the Louvre, but he was also entering into the spirit of the Futurist Marinetti's proclamation:

Museums: cemeteries! . . . Identical, surely, in the sinister promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another. Museums: public dormitories where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings. . . . Turn aside the canals to flood the museums!⁹

Found and lost

Later that year in Florence an art dealer received a letter offering 'Mona Lisa' for sale. He took it as a hoax and replied that he only dealt in originals and that he was unable to visit Paris to view the painting. Soon afterwards he was visited by a man calling himself Leonardo Vincenzo who said that 'Mona Lisa' was in his hotel room and that he required half a million lire and a guarantee that the painting would remain in its homeland, Italy. The dealer alerted the director of the Uffizi and the police, who then infiltrated the hotel. The next day, Leonardo Vincenzo was visited in his hotel room by the dealer, accompanied by the director. Here they saw 'Mona Lisa' being taken from a secret compartment at the bottom of a travelling trunk. This trunk was at once an echo of the suitcase within which Apollinaire and Picasso had concealed the Iberian statuettes and a pre-echo of the *Boîte-en-valise* (the 'Portable Museum') created by Marcel Duchamp years later. The dealer, the director and the thief then took the painting to the Uffizi to verify that this was indeed 'Mona Lisa' and not a copy. Vincenzo was immediately arrested and his name was revealed to be Vincenzo Peruggia, a workman who had been engaged some years previously at the Louvre. His naïve attempt at a kind of cultural restitution (with a price tag) met with limited success: the painting was then displayed in Florence, Rome and Milan before its triumphant return to Paris.¹⁰

The Italian poet and militarist D'Annunzio tried to reclaim the whole story of the theft for himself. He first hinted that he had commissioned Peruggia to steal the painting then, in 1920, said that 'Mona Lisa' had passed through his hands but that he arranged for its return to the Louvre due to his 'satiety and disgust' with it.¹¹

Some years later, the Surrealists (given their name by Apollinaire) were to appropriate the painting for their own ends. 'Mona Lisa' was now fair game. In 1919 Marcel Duchamp added a moustache and goatee to a cheap reproduction and made it the vehicle for one of his risqué puns.¹² Subsequently, Duchamp was to make a postcard-sized reproduction of this work for the *Boîte-en-valise*. Salvador Dali, taking his cue from Duchamp, exaggerated the moustache and egotistically turned 'Mona Lisa' into a self-portrait. In 1930 Fernand Léger incor-

porated a copy into his painting *Gioconda with Keys*, claiming that it was 'an object like any other object'.¹³

But the story of the return of the painting, and the resolution of the narrative, is a blind. The theft marks the moment when the Delirious Museum infects the Louvre. 'Mona Lisa's' absence changed its meaning forever – Leonardo's famous painting had encountered modernity. In a sense it was 'removed for photography' to be endlessly reproduced mechanically. 'Mona Lisa' was packed up and concealed and, instead of being an object fixed in place both on the wall and in the imagination, it became nomadic. It may never have returned. Now the painting is impossible to see. The space that 'Mona Lisa' occupied on the morning of 22 August 1911 is taken up by a glass box and a crowd of people. Henri Lefebvre wrote:

The tourist trade – whose aim is to attract crowds to a particular site – historic city, beautiful view, museums etc. – ruins the site insofar as it achieves its aim: the city, the view, the exhibits are invisible behind the tourists, who can only see one another.¹⁴

How many photographs taken by these museum visitors show nothing but the reflection of the photographer or the camera's white flash? By photographing the painting, the box within which it is contained has become the mirror prophesied by Louis Bérour. The crowds are still looking for the lost painting. But 'Mona Lisa' is forever missing. At the heart of the Ur-museum there is an absence. Melancholy permeates the Salon Carré and seeps out into Paris; a city of lost things.

I have retrospectively appointed Apollinaire as the first curator of the Delirious Museum in compensation for his wrongful imprisonment. The coincidence of his temporary possession of the stolen statuettes from the Louvre and his troubled involvement in the story of 'Mona Lisa' grants him a special relevance to the history of the museum. Inadvertently he was the subversive at the heart of a reinterpretation of the Louvre and, by extension, the institution of the museum itself. At this point the space of the museum changes from presence to absence. The messages of the objects in the collection shift, becoming fluid and uncertain.