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Keynote by Pius Knüsel

Orphans of the Modern Age. On the Gift of the Past.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear curators

It must be a little like when our favourite auntie dies. Only yesterday we were regular visitors to her house, snuggling into the worn velvet upholstery, feeling at home among the enamelled pans and the heavy bakelite phone, petting the poodle, letting her spoil us with coffee and cake, and surreptitiously casting a worried, wistful glance at the overgrown garden. And suddenly we're standing amid the soulless clutter, not quite knowing what to do with this gift of the past.

That's how I, as an outsider, imagine your release into entrepreneurial freedom, your step into museum autonomy. Only yesterday you were enjoying the protection of state-run companies whose profits and survival – complete with museum – were guaranteed. And now, as the heirs, you're exposed to the wind and weather, to impatient co-heirs, greedy relations, eager tax collectors and property speculators.

There will be those of you who consider the situation less dramatic. But metaphors are indispensable crutches for communication – surely a difficulty, but one I envy you heads and curators of communication museums for: in simple terms, you talk about talking. And here we are, talking about how one might talk about talking. That's what museums of communication are all about. Yours are the only museums with no distance to their content. But, in view of the indispensable inertia of the institution, however hard they try to stay up-to-date, they always lag behind. And where they address the past, they use metaphors. Inventing them would be fun – if only there were enough money around!

Yes, our dear deceased auntie has left us plenty of objects and not much money. But she does not just symbolize the government monopolies under whose shielding hand your museums grew to maturity. Our old auntie is a whole era, a paradigm of society and the economy and development. Our societies evolved from the unruly capitalism of the nineteenth century into well-orchestrated communities. For a hundred years, the republican state was considered the embodiment of rational management of infrastructures designed as physical enablers of social advancement, economic growth and access to the world. The philosophy of the rationally regulating state flourished on the basis of constant technical progress, whose sediments are collected in communication and transport museums today: from the telegraph to the pneumatic dispatch system to the postage stamp to the computer.

To the computer? As omnipresent as the computer is in your exhibitions, it already belongs to a subsequent era. Because with the computer, human beings are, for the very first time, in possession of something like a universal instrument of communication elusive of regulation. The binary format offers a class of data that can absorb everything, convey everything and generate an unlimited degree of interconnectedness. And that allows the flow of communication to be shaped in a completely new way.

Up to now, the evolution of functioning (democratically governed) structures has been reflected by the technical apparatuses of the time, or conversely: the equipment itself has shaped the superstructure of society. This interaction will continue in future, with the single difference that now progress has disappeared inside the machinery. When the interaction was still visible, it seemed only natural for government monopolies – which expressed a collective vision and its collective governance in the interest of the common good – to be responsible for collecting the relevant machinery, stamps and documents. They were assembling the building blocks of the identity of the twentieth century, material that mirrored pride in organizational (not technical!) services of epoch-making significance and paradigmatic effect. And when we made our way to the PTT Museum twenty years ago, we experienced this spiritual unity with the objects around us. Their significance was clear: our fascination with technology harboured recognition of services rendered to society and a political dimension that only technology could turn into concrete reality. For the fact is: a modern state would be inconceivable without ever better, more powerful communicational structures – and I use the word modern, not only in the sense of democracy, but equally of administrative efficiency, accessibility of information and transparency of processes, as bequeathed to the world by Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The state itself needed a strong post office, telegraph system, telephone network, railways, not only to govern but to enable its citizens to participate in the collective idea. It was only thanks to these infrastructures that the modern state was able to become what it is now.

Like so much that determines our present-day lives but is only now becoming apparent, this spiritual unity was lost with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Communism itself had relied on all-encompassing communication. Every totalitarian ideology depends on the ability to reach and influence individuals, who only become a manipulable mass through modern means of communication. The concept of mass communication originates from the era of revolution and would not be imaginable without the jumble stored in your institutions. Communism failed. And as dialectically as its author wished, it has generated its antithesis: neo-liberalism. I do not consider it a coincidence that the same historical threshold that marked the end of the collectivist vision also heralded the beginning of the digital revolution.

Let's take a look at this new form of technical progress after 1989. What it basically comes down to, is saying farewell to the machine as a self-explanatory tool. The computer conceals its technical potential. It is a homogeneous, essentially boring interface for a virtually unlimited number of functions. While a series of classic telephones tells the story of bridging distances, of design, comfort and ergonomic shapes, of private space and public space, there will be nothing more boring than a future exhibit of mobile phones from the first two decades of the third millennium. And while the archaeologists of Alpha Centauri, who can be anticipated to discover the earth in the year 2842, will understand a manual telephone switchboard, all those beige boxes with rectangular windows will be an enigma to them.

This change is decisive to the nature of communication museums. The present no longer has any fascinating objects to offer! The future consists solely of behavioural patterns called up via interfaces full of metaphors. And with that, communication museums will become museums of behaviour, replacing corporate biographies by prototypical biographies of human beings.

That brings us to privatization, the second "blessing" of the collapse of Communism. It is the flip side of the shattered belief in collective reason, because it is the mirror of individual ambition. Which would, incidentally, be inconceivable without computers to make structure-building knowledge and social templates generally accessible in the form of software. But the new liberalism has rehabilitated more than ambition. It has also fuelled the belief that, after two hundred years of democratic education, the individual has been transformed from egotist to altruistic citizen and can be trusted to be mindful of the common good, even when emancipated

from state control. Although captains of industry regularly undermine this idea through their actions, that is not enough to refute the educational principles of the modern era.

Privatization has catapulted communication museums out of the sheltered care of state-run concerns. And now, here they stand, orphans of the modern age, complete with their gift of auntie's clutter, trying to come to terms with a world that has dedicated itself to superficiality, mobility and ephemerality. A paradigm shift that art museums, for example, benefit from enormously. They are not merely subject to the growing aestheticization of the world. They are helping to shape that world by raising issues and socially anchoring aesthetic questions. Once concerned with democratizing art, today they banish that selfsame art to a ghetto of prestigious intellectuality, of bourgeois savoir-vivre. These hierarchical differentials, which were a thorn in the side of the 1968 revolutionaries, have become a constitutive factor. Art museums have managed to increase the symbolic value of the pieces in their collections and elevate them to social significance. So much so that nowadays even art illiterates and the enemies of art consider a visit to an art museum a must. Sociology has a term for that: "Second Order Desires", meaning the wish of the many to be like the few by adopting their behaviour, for instance by going to a museum. Art museums profit from the fact that the passage of the centuries has conferred significance on their holdings – and that art is governed by the law of simultaneous co-existence, as opposed to the world of technology, where the old is continually displaced by the new.

The economic consequences of privatization are well known and the subject of this conference: release into independence, the crumbling away of financial foundations, the necessity for reorientation. It is my noble task to hearten you in this uncertain situation. When Jakob Messerli asked me if I felt up to it, my first thought was: never. What can I tell the guardians of telephone wires, given a wave of wireless gadgets as similar as two peas in a pod? How can I raise their spirits – assuming they're low – in view of the changed understanding of technology? How can I give them hope in the face of the depressing anti-museum attitude of the young? And of the declining generosity of their former parent companies, whose own former guardian, the state, is pulling the rug out from under them by deregulating and letting in competition?

But it did not take much rumination to come to the conclusion that the situation isn't quite that desperate. Which is probably even more obvious to you than to me, but I hope you will bear with me and grant me the speaker's right to dramatize. If only for entertainment's sake ...

Much as it may amaze you, your situation is exceedingly hopeful. Because you're sitting on some fairly substantial capital. It consists of:

1. one or more principal sponsors with a moral obligation;
2. material with nostalgic value and symbolic potential;
3. the undisputed need for self-renewal.

Let's start with the last point and move backwards.

1. Self-renewal: Now that the cosy atmosphere of auntie's house is gone forever, it's time to start cleaning up and refurnishing. Everyone understands that you have to do this, even the traditionalists on your boards of trustees. You have to, not only for economic but also for social reasons. That's an advantage enjoyed by very few: you don't have to justify yourselves; no one will question the need for your investments, your desire to transform yourselves. That's your initial advantage, and while it's not enough to actually obtain the required money, it is enough to get others to start loosening their purse strings.
2. Nostalgic value: Your collections contain hundreds, even thousands, of objects that the changing times have robbed of their souls. They remind us of extinct animals displayed on pedestals. Yet only a generation ago they still spoke to us ordinary people. This potential still

slumbers in your holdings, and you have two possibilities for reclaiming their power. You can devise a modern context for the equipment in your collections, in other words exhibit the pieces using all the aids available to present-day exhibition makers. At which point you are communicating in a modern way about bygone eras of communication.

Or you can recreate the world of the past by charging the objects with cultural significance and reconstructing the social panorama they contributed to. At which point you reveal their nostalgic value. You can build Potemkin villages for that. The curiosity would be there, that's for certain. Place your own taxidermic specimens in a nature-like setting, the way the American Museum of Natural History does. Or call on other cultural, above all artistic, artefacts – especially films – to bring the past back to life. In the process, you will discover that communication itself cannot be the subject – that would be like praying to God to inspire you with good prayers. Communication has to be embedded in a larger picture, as a behaviour that shapes and reflects society. For instance: you could recreate the atmosphere of the world of policing in the Fifties (complete with a festival of crime films) to convey a visceral impression of the incredible contribution made by radio technology, its limits and pitfalls. In a way, you have to take visitors back to their childhoods, even to their prenatal phase. Because if we look at yesterday's technology through contemporary eyes, we'll be bored within five minutes. That's nostalgia. Fading out the present! Perceiving yesterday as the highest value – a "height" you have to produce artificially. And should play with unapologetically! Whether communication museums can manage this in the long term I can't predict, because I don't know enough about the restrictions you're subject to. But in any case, you would do well to cooperate with museums of work, of mobility, of administration, of cultural history, of any number of other areas – or even to bring them all together under a single roof!

3. The principal sponsor. Finally, you're thinking, finally he's coming to the most important point. But we owed your prospective sponsor that long detour. Because he – and this is a purely rhetorical "he", since "he" may as easily be a "she" – wants to understand what communication museums are all about. Not that he's really interested, but he does want to be taken seriously.

Let's start out with the one, or ones, you already have: your post office, or your telecommunications company. In the course of privatization, these formerly public concerns hived off their museums and now contribute to their independent support structure, here in Switzerland in the form of a foundation. They have a moral, perhaps even a legal, obligation to do so. But you can be sure that only a management that still remembers the monopoly era will recognize that obligation. The men and women who take the rudder in twenty years' time are growing up now, in an atmosphere of privatization and competition. They will regard cultural obligations as economic ballast, meaning: a nuisance. Their readiness to supply funding will disappear, no matter what the law may say. So you might as well start practising now what you will need to do to soften them up then. Speak to them as if they were patrons. But treat them like sponsors. The difference is substantial.

A patron is a person, a sponsor is a company.

You stroke a patron's ego and address a sponsor's business sense.

In this case, ego means: appealing to an individual's generosity and personal commitment.

Present this commitment as the boss's personal achievement.

And then be as generous with the patron as you would be with a sponsor whose services you wanted to repay.

Stick to the CEO's heels. He's the one who holds the purse strings.

Credit him with intelligence. Assume he has good judgement.

Invite your patron to an opening.

Invite him to bring guests to VIP previews.

Give him a guided tour whenever he likes.

Give him the feeling the museum represents him and him alone.

Create communicational life-worlds – whether nostalgic or futuristic – that he can identify with, that he can relate to in terms of his own life-world or past. In other words, take due account of

your post office or telecom CEO's biography. Send out the bloodhounds in case you can't discover it yourself. CEOs view themselves as the prototype of the new human being in any case. And they are – not because of their skills and abilities, which tend to be mediocre, but thanks to their position and the exposure associated with it.

And develop a high profile: use their company's logo as often and prominently as possible.

Extend invitations to their staff. Merchandise outside products.

And express your thanks publicly whenever you can.

Twenty years from now, Swisscom will be like Sunrise (if Sunrise still exists), and that's the only way you will be able to convince the future Jens Alder that he should sink a few million into the Berne Communication Museum every year: because he himself will be celebrated as a hero and philanthropist. Which can only benefit his reputation and career. You call that "playing the vanity card". It's true, the only patrons who get by without vanity are the ones who offer their help spontaneously. And they are as rare as communication museums that can get by without outside funding! For all the others, this is the fuel that feeds decisions. So cultivate a mix of personalized and company-related activities.

Why isn't the satisfaction of patronage enough, why these voluntary tit-for-tat services?

Because they will help acquire principal sponsors from beyond the traditional circle of historical obligation. Sponsors who must be offered compensatory services – usually communication services, ironically enough – that the patron, too, will hear about. And as a minimum of corporate identification can always be expected, it is advantageous for the patron to discover his company in the logo strip!

You can also deal with new sponsors this way, should you have access to the higher management echelons. Contrary to general marketing theory, sponsorship is still a very personalized business and depends on CEOs' whims, no matter how large and professional a sponsorship department may be. It can only be to the good, particularly in a not directly consumer-oriented cultural field, if a company head derives personal gratification from a sponsorship commitment. If he can, for example, satisfy his play instinct. Or let his enthusiasm for old-fashioned machinery run free. But never forget that generosity is not a modern virtue. Which makes it all the more vital for communication museums to take an active part in the ongoing debate over the private funding of culture. Switzerland has not made any inroads here as yet: there is no evidence of a systematic action plan being drawn up by the needy. As one of the founders of the Culture & Economy forum, I know more than enough about that. The political debate surrounding private funding for culture must pursue two aims: it must always attach positive value to ambition where ambition is geared to generosity, and it must champion tax breaks for private cultural funders. The reward will be a future for your museums.

You yourselves know that when you get talking to company sponsorship departments, it's always a matter of give and take. Develop (nostalgic) worlds and experiences, adventurous perspectives on the future; address clear target audiences (a different one in every exhibition). Your colleagues from the art museums have claimed the monopoly on prestige; what remains for you is charm: flatter your audience. And, by extension, your sponsor. That is a far cry from selling your soul: the sponsor, as sponsor, sees the surface. And he wants to encounter his own reflection there. Reserve the content for foundations and public funding bodies. The latter are intent on educating the general public. And on courageous messages. That show the way to the future. Dare to say things that stir up the politicians, that set off media feeding frenzies – communication is the circulatory system of the social body, a body that is suffering from myriad disorders. That is where you can intervene!

Museums of art cannot sell contemporary art to their sponsors. In art, the surface cannot be separated from the message. But in your field, it can. That puts you at a decisive advantage. You talk about us. All of us. All the time. Your museums have the future ahead of them – if you know how to unwrap and take care of the gift we call the past. Your machines are only emblems. Give them texts and subtexts that are more than anecdotal. Give them content that

touches people and makes them think.

That's all I wanted to tell you so far – oh, sorry, I forgot about auntie's well-coifed poodle. What shall we do with him? That is a mystery I leave to you. Until the next conference!

Thank you for your attention.

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