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EPOCH GALLERY

Curated by Peter Wu +, Los Angeles, various exhibitions, 2020–present,
<https://epoch.gallery>

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1. Drawing from the ‘natural common’ established by philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, which designates nature (or in/organic matter shared across all in/animate entities) as the original commons, the commons can be understood as a place beyond public/private binaries (2009: 250).
2. The hypermediacy of digital subjects and content therein parallels many concerns present within the museum. The subsumption of bodies here is twofold; beyond the digital consumption of data via algorithmic tracking, the rising deaths of cobalt mining children and gore capitalist economies that provide the materials used in most tech must be recompensed.
3. Art historian, critic, curator and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp’s mediation on the ‘fragility of the museum’s claims to represent anything coherent at all’ reifies the contradiction in these shifts and thus remains a deeply pertinent one (1993: 54).

In approaching the Internet as a shared public space, or what has more pointedly become known as the commons, people are immediately thrust into its myriad and interfolded legacies as a terrain founded and transfigured by globalization, militarization and the political economies that continue to contour its applications.¹ As a domain whose physical hardware and material composites remain largely reliant upon the subsumption of bodies, how can a digital commons be conceived (or better yet, reconceived) when so many of the Internet’s technical apparatuses continue to be mediated, homogeneous and exclusionary?² The virtual artist-run gallery experiment EPOCH, conceived by the Los Angeles-based artist Peter Wu+ at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, has undertaken many of these concerns through a variety of conceptual and collaborative curatorial framings. Initiated by Wu+ as a response to the sudden global shift to remote modes of engagement, EPOCH’s theoretical underpinnings have endured as largely mediative on the role (and necessity) of the museum during and beyond global crises. Indeed, with physical exhibitions having largely ceased due to the mandated closures of institutions globally, questions concerning the material function of the museum have revitalized public discourses of institutional critique. EPOCH’s emergence as an autonomous and collaboratively modelled platform may then consequently be understood as not only a reaction to the present but urgent revisionism to museology itself.

With the platform’s inaugural exhibition *End Demo* (25 April–29 May 2020), staged in a VR-rendered assemblage of flat white rubble, viewers are encouraged to click through the ruins of a white cube and engage with the artworks featured (and hidden) therein. This lingering visage of the museum as ruin, though by no means a new sentiment, has become both backdrop and foundation, not only as conceptual fodder for EPOCH’s varying iterations, but across shared physical landscapes as museums remain(ed) static, untouched and transfigured into reliquary archipelagos.³ The move to online modes of engagement, though seemingly inevitable, has largely relied on this spatial partition wherein digital modes of engagement are nearly always situated as supplemental – standing secondary to materiality, to physical connection and to ‘in real life’ (or IRL) interactions. The collective sense of alienation has likewise amplified these partitions wherein IRL and digital engagements are understood in a binary. In tandem with these beliefs, EPOCH has served as a remediation of not only a general detachment from these assertions, but from one another. The platform’s digitally rendered topographies,



Above: End Demo (2020), installation view of EPOCH virtual art exhibition featuring Jessica Goehring, Kara Joslyn, Erica Mahinay, Jake Kean Mayman, Emanuel Röhss and Peter Wu+. Below: Freeport (2021), exterior exhibition view of EPOCH virtual art exhibition featuring Neïl Beloufa, Sarah Rosalena Brady, Alice Bucknell, Juan Covelli, Alexandra Koumantaki, Amanda Ross-Ho and Hiram Sab. Photos: courtesy Peter Wu+.

4. It is worth noting that while many of EPOCH's structures are modelled after collaboratively designed pavilions, physical edifices or imagined spaces, *Phantom Limb* is currently the only exhibition featuring a specific institutional body (Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Ahmanson Building) that once physically housed exhibitions and artwork.

though perhaps most poignantly illustrative of this separation by way of each isolated and uninhabited gallery space, likewise initiates Wu+'s ongoing concern with notions of collapse and temporality. The visual fragmentation of its visage similarly seems to reproach the seemingly physical immutability of the museum as a stable context, showcasing instead how easily shattered its visage is when rendered outside of its element.

Though questions concerning the museum's sedimentation have remained an ongoing concern in cultural sectors even beyond Wu+'s curatorial interrogations of it, EPOCH remains distinct in addressing these concerns through a collaboratively rendered, open-access and semi-temporal space. The platform's wry play on 'live' exhibition dates is perhaps most deeply emblematic of the gallery's conceptual preoccupation with temporality. Here, though each exhibition features a debuted opening and closing, the exhibitions remain open-ended and are archived upon close in a manner that permits visitors to still view each exhibition in its entirety. Wu+'s riff on these forms of institutional precarity and engagements with/in it is largely what has made EPOCH such a compelling and critical experiment. With the platform having initiated many of these considerations through *End Demo's* demolition of the white cube, proceeding exhibitions including *Afterlife* (20 May–17 July 2020), *Fallen Monuments* (18 July–4 September 2020) and *Phantom Limb* (4 October 2020–8 January 2021) have similarly relied on imagery of the museum's architectural ruin as an analogy for the structural devastation and crumbling systems of antiquity that it continues to proliferate and rely on.⁴ More pointedly, this has included seeking to disrupt the systematization of white hetero-masculine hegemonies that have founded, and continue to plague, the museum and its contents therein. Wu+'s curatorial emphasis on women and femme, queer, trans and artists of colour as critical contributors eschews the institutional marginalization (and recurrent tokenization) of these creatives while foregrounding vital disruptions and greater – still urgently needed – representation of minoritarian groups.

And though many of EPOCH's exhibitions have spent ample time musing on the perils of institutional objectivity (and its nuances in online contexts), Wu+'s collaborative curating and resulting presentations remain distinct in their emphasis on transformative, generative and fluctuating stagings. This nuanced and more positivist approach has largely permitted the platform to retain its critical lens without fatalistic musings that relinquish subjective agency to the technosphere. EPOCH's sixth iteration, *Substrata* (9 January–5 March 2021) playfully exemplifies this through a collaborative presentation organized in conjunction with the Los Angeles Museum of Art and its founder, Los Angeles-based artist Alice Könitz. A coy nod towards spatial hybridity, the pavilion that Könitz devised specifically for *Substrata* personifies Wu+'s founding interest in the fluidity of online exhibition-making and the collective capacity to likewise shape-shift accordingly. Beyond *Substrata's* satiric play on the museum and its varying situations as the de facto site for exhibition-making, iterations such as *Labyrinth* (5 September–23 October 2020), featuring a pavilion designed by the Los Angeles-based artist Amir Nikravan, and the phantasmal *Wonderland* (6 March–11 June 2021), for example, have similarly relied on site-specific structures and collaboratively designed pavilions. And though *Labyrinth* and *Wonderland* remain conceptually disparate from one another, namely in that the former emphasizes perpetuity (Nikravan's maze) and the vulnerability of 'natural' space while the latter highlights the violence of displacement, both rely on artworks that examine the pluralities of place and subjective hybridity within it.

With the role of one's varying positionalities (current, past and future) featured as a thematic crux for each iteration, Wu+ has continued to problematize assumptions of the technosphere as an entirely separate or parallel space. The gallery sediments these concerns perhaps most poignantly within *Wonderland*, which employs the visage of the abandoned amusement park by the same name in Chenzhaung Village, China, as a means of ruminating on deterritorialization, national identity and the Chinese diaspora. Though otherwise dystopian landscapes continue to appear as a formal framework for many of EPOCH's exhibitions, the onus of engagement and ability to navigate the platform's virtual terrain rests entirely with the viewer. With a number of cursory points laden throughout each exhibition space, EPOCH avoids the pitfalls of static art engagement and becomes instead entirely phenomenological. Wu+'s implicit request for the viewer's physical participation, that is, clicking what is apparent and seeking out what may be unseen, likewise appears deeply analogous to many of his exhibition's thematic concerns. Accordingly, each presentation undertakes an alternative approach to the commons (and one's subjectivity therein) as a space to collectively reimagine how mutuality and connectedness might look amidst a shared entanglement in otherwise hypermediated spaces of control. The platform explicated these dynamics in *Freeport* (12 June–1 October 2021), which utilized the rise of the NFT as politically commensurate with freeports. With both entities operating in otherwise ambiguous territories and yet prolific in their very material devastation, Wu+ has ambitiously sedimented *Freeport* as a hybridized presentation – functioning as both a sustainable NFT and an online exhibition. In addition to the exhibition's housing structure having been closely modelled on the Luxembourg Freeport, Wu+'s interventionist approach to the growing marketization of technological art/efacts has situated *Freeport* (and EPOCH more broadly) as a critical terrain for creative resistance.

Wu+'s curatorial emphasis in foregrounding structures that, much like the exhibitions and artwork featured therein, interrogate the role of spatiality continues to complicate not only the parameters of space, but how we elect to connect and dwell within it. In this vein EPOCH has elicited a direly needed commons that cuts into the digital divide, prompting viewers not to sever, but utilize and remember the material circumstances that predicate and enable shared spaces. Perhaps this is why EPOCH feels like such an urgently needed endeavour amidst the onslaught of digital content that has been initiated over the past year. And though the era of digital globalization continues to transfigure an ebbing relationship with spaces, history and culture, EPOCH has initiated in its wake an arena of metamorphic becoming – ever changing, ever fluid.

References

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