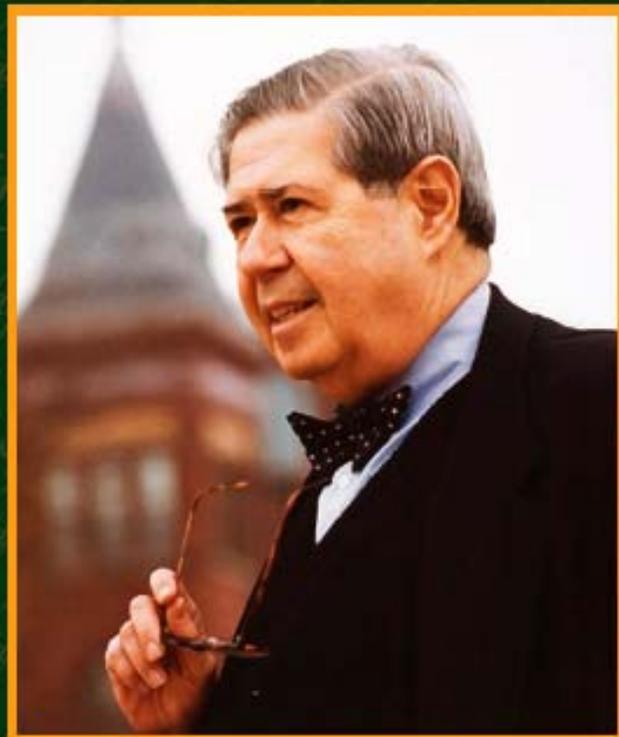


*Fiftieth Anniversary Year*

# CURATOR

THE MUSEUM JOURNAL



*In Honor of Stephen Weil*

volume

50

number

2

CALIFORNIA  
ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

April 2007



ALTAMIRA  
PRESS



**Editorial Note**

- 185 A Gathering in Honor of Stephen Weil

**Forums**

- 187 A Victoria Conversation: Stephen Weil and "Museums Matter"  
RICHARD KURIN
- 191 Maximizing the External Value of Museums  
EMLYN H. KOSTER AND JOHN H. FALK

**Suitcase Notes**

- 197 A Stephen Weil Portrait  
TOM L. FREUDENHEIM

**Articles**

- 201 Reading Weil: A Premature Appreciation  
PETER LINETT
- 219 Museums, Corporatism and the Civil Society  
ROBERT R. JANES
- 239 Thinking about "Scenes": A New View of Visitors' Influence on  
Museums  
VOLKER KIRCHBERG
- 255 The Case for Holistic Intentionality  
RANDI KORN

**Books**

- 265 *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*  
By Bruce Altshuler, ed.  
REVIEWED BY JILL STERRETT
- 268 *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century*  
By Hugh H. Genoways, ed.  
REVIEWED BY DANIEL SILVER

## Reading Weil: A Premature Appreciation



**Peter Linett**

*Abstract* Reviewing the published legacy of museum scholar Stephen E. Weil, this paper analyzes the development of Weil's thought and appraises his contributions to museum discourse. It traces two shifts in Weil's published writings: first, the broadening of his interests from the legal field and the art world to the situation and purposes of museums generally; second, the liberalization of Weil's museological politics, which gradually altered his early view of the (art) museum as a private, sacrosanct realm and led to his later calls for museums to act as community servants. The paper also examines Weil's rhetorical strategies, with particular attention to the hypotheticals and analogies for which he was well known, and offers a provisional evaluation of the extent of his influence on museum debate and practice.



When museum leaders, scholars, and practitioners gathered recently to celebrate the life and work of Stephen Weil, they did so under the conference title *Museums Matter: A Tribute to Stephen Weil*. The cheerful certainty—or is it anxious assertion?—of those first two words reminds us, if only by contrast, of Weil's own circumspection about the state of the museum field. Consider his titles, which emphasized speculative musing over sanguine pronouncement: *Rethinking the Museum*, for instance, or *A Cabinet of Curiosities*. The title of his last collection of essays, *Making Museums Matter*, to which the conference title nods, encapsulates a proposition that runs through much of Weil's oeuvre: that museums can never take this business of mattering for granted.

In the essays themselves, Weil is impatient with the profession's tendency toward self-justifying discourse. "The questions about their field that museum workers serve up to one another at their periodic gatherings. . . are generally creampuffs," he admonished in a 1994 talk to the New Jersey Association of Museums, later published in *Museum News*:

*Peter Linett (peter@sloverlinett.com) is a partner at Slover Linett Strategies Inc. and books editor of Curator: The Museum Journal.*

Although shaped and flavored in a variety of ways, these questions can almost invariably be reduced to the single one of whether the museum, in essence, is truly a worthwhile institution. With almost equal invariability, those attending these gatherings conclude that it is (1995, 33).

For Weil, only good museums matter, and they matter because that's how he defines a good museum: one that makes "a positive difference in the quality of people's lives" (2002, 73). Bad ones—and for Weil the bad museum is more than a theoretical possibility—don't matter.

Moreover, Weil would have been sensitive to a transitive question that hangs over our title: museums matter *to whom*? "The larger part of the American public," he noted in a 1993 lecture at the University of Michigan, "thinks neither particularly well nor particularly badly about the museum but, rather, scarcely thinks about the museum at all" (1995, 107). If we want to say anything meaningful about the health of museums as public institutions, we need to acknowledge the existence both of people (like us) to whom museums matter a great deal and those for whom they may be "increasingly irrelevant. . . to everyday life."

Weil's ideas, then, were sometimes different from the uses to which they have been put by a museum community in search of reassurance about its cultural standing. So the occasion of his passing (in August 2005) prompts us to take another look at those ideas, attempting to read Weil with the same clear-sightedness and precision with which he appraised the museum scene. I have tried to do as much in these pages. I begin by tracing the development of a few of Weil's central concerns in the essays gathered in his four major books, which span the period 1971 to 2002.<sup>1</sup> Then, turning to the domain of rhetoric, I examine some of Weil's characteristic methods, with particular attention to the hypotheticals and analogies for which he was well known. Lastly, I make a few evaluative and necessarily provisional remarks about the accomplishment these writings represent, and the nature of their legacy for the museum profession.

The published pieces that form the basis for this appreciation by no means provide a complete picture, however. They represent only the most public, dispersible ways in which Weil influenced his colleagues and other practitioners and scholars in the three overlapping fields in which he worked: the law, art, and museums. It will be up to others who knew Weil better than I did to complete the picture by recalling the colleague, committee member, conference speaker, conversationalist, correspondent, mentor, and the other formal and informal roles in which he shaped the conversation in and around museums.

## 1. Works on Paper

Reading Weil's collected talks and essays in the order in which they were originally written—as distinct from the order in which they were later organized for thematic unity in the four collections he published—reveals two kinds of change at work. Most obvious, though far from simple, is the widening of Weil's concerns, first from the law to art and art museums and later from art museums to museums in general. This widening, of

course, parallels the three broad phases of his professional career: attorney at a distinguished New York firm from 1956 to 1963; art museum administrator at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1967 to 1974 and the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden from 1974 to 1995; and think-tank observer of museums as an emeritus senior scholar at the Smithsonian's Center for Education and Museum Studies from 1995 until his death in 2005. Weil continued to make authoritative contributions in both the law and the art world even as he became the most prominent voice addressing the museum field at large. One of his last full-length essays, delivered as a "graduation" talk to a newly-trained class of docents at the Art Institute of Chicago in April 2005, reveals a still-restless reconsideration of the roles that art can play in the lives of non-specialists, even as it neatly condenses a lifetime's worth of thinking and reading on that subject (Weil 2005).

The other change involves a different kind of widening: a process of liberalization, in the various political and social senses of that word, by which Weil moved from an early sense of the (art) museum as a distinct, almost private realm operating in necessary isolation from daily public life, to his later calls for the museum to take its very definition from its role as a public servant. I'll look at both of those changes here, with emphasis on the latter. Tracing the development of what we might call Weil's "museological politics" will bring us to the heart of his ideas about the purposes and problems of the museum.

**From law to museums**—The widening of Weil's interests from the law to art was already well underway in the early 1970s, when he began writing the reviews, talks, and articles later collected in *Beauty and the Beasts: On Museums, Art, the Law, and the Market*. His "love/hate affair with the law," which involved frustration with the "minutiae" of everyday practice and growing dismay at the encroachment of litigation and legislation into "virtually every human activity"—an encroachment he saw as a diminishment of the law's "grander and more traditional concerns"—drove Weil out of the profession, and he began working as an art dealer at a Manhattan gallery of modern and contemporary art (1993, xv). That job led serendipitously to the museum world: one of the gallery's clients, who was also board president of the Whitney, offered Weil the position of administrator.

Yet as his writing from the Whitney period reveals, his fascination with the law never faded; in an important sense he remained a lawyer for the rest of his life. He continued to publish and speak in legal circles, becoming a widely-cited expert in the hybrid fields of art law and museum law—though Weil himself insisted, with characteristic rigor, that no such fields exist as distinct bodies of law (1993, 199). Many of those writings were reprinted or first published in *ARTnews*, *Museum News*, and other non-legal venues, suggesting the vital role Weil played as an explainer of the legal world to the art and museum worlds. (He also played the reverse role on more than one occasion, explaining and advocating for the needs of artists or museums at various legal symposiums and before policy and legislative commissions.)

Weil's legal background gave him a level of visibility unusual for a museum administrator, even one at the Whitney or the Hirshhorn. His unique mix of expertise in law, art, and art museum management provided a raised platform, so to speak, from which

he could see and explore issues that stood at the margins and intersections of those fields. From that perch, it was only a matter of time before Weil was asking the broadest sorts of questions about art museums and, indeed, writing not just about art museums but about museums as a cultural category. (Art museums remained paradigmatic for him: they constituted the default museum type from which other types were to be differentiated).

More importantly, perhaps, the law exerted a continuing influence on Weil as both metaphor and memory. He makes the metaphor explicit in a 1993 essay, "Publicly Chosen Art," in which he likens the role of the National Endowment for the Arts in deciding which artists to support to the role of a juror deliberating guilt or innocence in a trial (1995, 70). Weil's point here—that such verdicts must be reached not on the basis of one's personal views about the propriety of the depicted content of an artwork or the rightness of its message, but on the basis of professionally-developed standards of artistic excellence—is essentially a formalist defense of artists' rights. Even so, the legal imagery tells us something about his search for an articulated source or framework of value that would place our judgments about museums on something like an evidentiary basis. In the law, of course, that source and framework are ultimately provided by the Constitution, and Weil gives a prominent place to that document in a 1996 lecture, finding in it an indirect influence on American art museum practice (2002, 174–175). Elsewhere, he discusses the 1976 constitution of the American Association of Museums, which he helped to draft (1993, 117).

Throughout the essays, Weil seems interested in discovering—or, failing that, in creating—some codified set of principles to which he can refer not only questions about the value of museums (such as those raised by the academic left and others), but also his own, ever-more-critical questions. Hence his 1993 lecture, "On a New Foundation: The American Art Museum Reconceived," which amounts to a manifesto for the art museum of the future, which won't, he hopes, be vulnerable to the kind of "questioning forces" that have "blown away the foundations on which its predecessor for so long rested" (1995 123). Hence also his later attempts, gathered in the final volume, *Making Museums Matter*, to ensure that the substance of any such principles ultimately derives not from the needs and ideals of the museum itself, however important and noble these may be, but from the needs and ideals of the public the museum is meant to serve. The metaphor of the law, with its basis in the consent of the governed, is never far below the surface of those pages.

The law also functions as memory in Weil's writings, particularly when he addresses the question of whether museum workers can properly call their field a "profession." This question occupied Weil a good deal in the late 1980s, on the evidence of essays like the 1988 "In Pursuit of a Profession: The Status of Museum Work in America" (1990) and the 1989 "Coleman's Vision of the Museum Worker: Is it Still Valid Today?" (1990). Professionalization was on the minds of many museum workers then, as it still is, and also on the minds of other kinds of workers in the arts (such as orchestra musicians and visual artists). But Weil's acute response to the question may also have something to do with his identity as a lawyer. Even more than medicine, the law retains its status as the quintessential profession, with its carefully monitored training and accreditation of newcomers, its system of internal sanctions against misconduct, its tradition of scholarly publication within highly specialized sub-topics, the autonomy of its individual practi-

tioners, and its high social status (despite the obvious disdain that the public also feels for lawyers, which is surely more acute now than when Weil was practicing).

It seems probable that one doesn't leave such a profession lightly. So we should not be surprised to detect a note of wistfulness when Weil, in assessing museum workers' various efforts to professionalize, is forced to conclude that they have fallen short, and inevitably so. Museum workers must always subordinate the loyalties and mandates that arise from their professional identity to the good of the museum in which they work and the vision of its director: The "vertical" pull of institutional unity of purpose must trump the "horizontal" pull of professional affiliation, or the museum cannot thrive. And museum work itself fails to rise to the level of urgency that gave the traditional professions their stature:

The great prestige that was accorded to those who practiced the learned professions—medicine, law, and theology—was not grounded on the fact that they were "professionals." It was based upon the awesome magnitude of the matters with which they regularly dealt: life, death, liberty, and salvation. We deal with lesser things. While some greater public recognition of our efforts would certainly be gratifying, it might nonetheless be wise for us to keep our claims proportionate (1990, 86).

If, as I suspect, Weil quietly wished that the museum field could offer him the authority and standing of a true profession to replace the one he left behind, he was too scrupulous an analyst to let that wish cloud his conclusion.

**The making of a (reasonable) radical**—To trace the other kind of change that occurs over the course of these writings—what I have called the liberalization of Weil's museological politics—we would do well to begin, as Weil himself does in the introduction to his first collection (1993, xii), with his "most vivid memory": the scene he encountered at the first AAM annual meeting he attended, in 1970. The meeting, which was held in New York that year,

. . . had scarcely begun when members of two [outside] protest groups—the Art Workers Coalition and the New York Art Strike—overran the podium and commandeered the microphones. Most of the delegates came from distant parts of the country and represented either history or natural history museums. Few had any notions of who the protesters were, and their initial responses were largely ones of astonishment (1990, xii).

What the protesters were demanding, Weil recounts, was that museums "abandon their traditional concerns and pledge, then and there, that their resources would henceforth be devoted to wiping out war, racism, sexism, and repression"—all subjects unrelated to the focus and expertise of most of the museums represented at the conference. In the protesters' view, the logic was obvious: "The establishment was to blame. Museums were part of the establishment. Museums were guilty as accomplices." Weil's readers will recognize this as the dark inverse of what he calls the museum field's own "secret syllogism": "All museums are good per se. My institution is undeniably a museum. Ergo, my institution is undeniably good" (2002, 57).

The incident seems to have made an impression. Weil returned to it in later writings, such as a 1995 talk to another AAM annual meeting (this one quite peaceful) in which he credited the 1970 protesters with having catalyzed a process of soul-searching about the value and responsibilities of museums. "How did museums benefit the public? Why were they worthy of continued support? . . . What kinds of positive changes can museums really effect in the world beyond their walls?" (2002, 95). These are, of course, the central questions in Weil's own work, or rather they became central as his thinking changed. By the time of the 1995 talk, Weil had come to suspect that, although the protesters had the wrong answers (and certainly the wrong tactics), they had the right questions. As I hope to show in the next few pages, it makes sense to think of Weil's development as a museum thinker, at least in part, as his process of making those questions his own and his efforts to answer them to his own satisfaction.

This was by no means clear at the start, however. In Weil's earliest talks and essays, which date from the years immediately following that 1970 gathering, we hear—as we might expect from the administrator of a prestigious and wealthy New York art museum—a desire to support the status quo, at least in some of its aspects, and a concern that museums, already swept up in what Weil called "an ongoing transformation. . . from a quasi- to a broadly public institution," might end up "losing something vital along the way" (1993, 5). He rejected as "farfetched" the demands from some quarters "that art museums must become whatever the community wants them to be" (1993, 17), and called for the art museum to find a balance between being "responsive to the various constituencies that it serves and, at the same time, authoritarian—even autocratic—in its approach to art" (1993, 23). Admitting that this position will be an "elitist sticking point," he declared that "[w]e may simply have a better idea of the value of what we are doing than the community at large" (1993, 18).

A year later, in 1972, Weil valorized the function of the art museum as a "monastery. . . a community of people committed to the truth that the visual is a separate, vital, and important part of human experience" (1993, 51). (He later challenged the idea that art should be cast as a separate realm.) Elsewhere, he insisted on the primacy of the museum's "custodial function": "collecting and preserving are and must remain the foundation for all of the museum's other activities. . . . The rest—no matter how important—is still peripheral" (1993, 53). He also characterized the emergence of the Western art museum as "almost inevitable" (1993, 31), and endorsed the "relatively serious atmosphere" in art museum galleries as an unfortunate but necessary defense against vandalism and accidents (1993, 33). Describing disputes between a museum and outside claimants, he tended to take the side of the museum (1993, 171–172).

If Weil could sound like the tradition-bound curator-turned-museum-director *par excellence* in such passages, there was also a parallel vein of more progressive thought emerging.<sup>2</sup> He began, in the same talks quoted above, to question the conventions of museum display: Why are artworks always "presented in the same deadpan fashion?" (1993, 38). Why can't there be "[g]reater candor by museums about what they think of the works they show?" (1993, 39). He welcomed multiplicity in museums' definitions of their purposes and identities, expressing an ideal that would remain important to him throughout his career. Perhaps most importantly, almost from the beginning he

thought broadly and empathically about the ways the public experienced and used art museums.

Weil's writings from the rest of that decade and the first few years of the 1980s don't focus on the museum's audience, but they do demonstrate a growing interest in the relationship between the art museum and the "larger society in which we are embedded" (1993, 123). In his 1976 review of the report of a national commission on philanthropy—Weil's first contribution to *Museum News*—and several talks on the larger legal, regulatory, and business climate in which museums must operate, he began to acknowledge not only that the museum is imbricated with other spheres of life on every level, but that it would do well to embrace that fact: "No matter how special we may feel," he told a museum gathering in 1976, "we are an inextricable part of the American community, and its future will be ours." There will be no special dispensation to protect museums from the currents of social change, "no Michelangelo-esque Moses. . . proclaiming: 'These are my people. They are better; they are different. Let them go'" (1993, 115). This was, for Weil, a practical strategy for survival in the "increasingly complex" world in which museums found themselves; he was not (yet) arguing that responsiveness to that larger society was the proper fulfillment of the museum's mission. But exploring such territory clearly began to broaden Weil's picture of the museum's obligations.

The next step in this gradual apostasy from what Weil called the "official museum theology" (1990, 29) came in 1982 in another *Museum News* article, "MGR: A Conspicuous of Museum Management," this one about management principles for museums (1993, 69–80). Weil had long been a reader of organizational and management theory in publications like the *Harvard Business Review* and the work of management guru Peter Drucker, and throughout his career he would apply the structural discipline and clarity of that literature to the museum field's particular (and, to Weil, crucial) confusions. One result, in "MGR," was a new note in his position about the centrality of the museum's collections. Like the museum's staff or its available budget, the collection is "a museum resource, not its purpose for being. . . . [T]he measure of museum management lies not in what the institution has historically acquired but in the current programmatic use to which the collection is put" (1993, 78).

The shift in this direction was incremental and by no means linear. Around the same time, Weil would also state categorically that "the central obligation of the museum is to preserve the material evidence of the past for the uses of the future" (1993, xi). Perhaps the two statements are not really mutually exclusive. Yet this very businesslike re-categorization of collections from purpose to tool—from intrinsic to instrumental value—marks the opening of a new line of thought that Weil would explore with increasing conviction in subsequent writings.

Within a few years, in 1985, Weil was asking why museum training programs so seldom cover how to make museums more responsive to their communities and why, for that matter, "it's scarcely possible to find any real consideration of the community" in the museum literature (1990, 20). His own search through a then-recent report, *Museums for a New Century* (AAM 1984), revealed the field's unintentional solipsism: the word "community" usually appeared as part of the phrase "museum community" instead of, in Weil's words, as a "reference to those very real flesh and blood, brick and mortar com-

munities in which we reside and from which of necessity museums must draw their sustenance" (1990, 20).

By 1987, he was wondering why museums couldn't help society address such extra-museological problems as drugs, AIDS, the arms race, and the growing disparity between America's rich and poor. "[Is] it that what we truly lack is a conception or a theory or a vision of the museum and its potential that would permit it. . . ?" (1990, 35–36). Weil is at a kind of ideological midpoint here. He has welcomed into his own discourse the very kinds of questions about the museum-society nexus that preoccupied the 1970 protestors, but he also recognizes that the museum field has, at that point, no self-concept that would render such questions relevant or even intelligible. Nor does Weil himself have, in 1987, such a concept ready at hand. In the talk just quoted, he offers no answer to the question of *why* museums should take on the burdens of outward social responsibility. What he has are genuine questions (alongside his usual rhetorical ones) and an instinctive, ethical spur that tells him to push in this direction. And push he does. We can read Weil's subsequent work as an attempt to provide that concept or "theory or. . . vision of the museum" to both himself and the field.

The following year saw Weil take a major step toward that goal in "The Proper Business of Museums: Ideas or Things?" (1990, 43). In style, subject, and persuasive authority, this essay represents the flowering of what we now recognize as Weil's mature work. It features his first extended use of a wittily hypothetical "example" (in this case, the National Toothpick Museum) to call our attention to assumptions so basic they tend to remain invisible. It insists that what museums exhibit is not only objects but ideas—"the two taken together"—and links that notion to a call for museums to shift their focus "from function to purpose." Most radically, it opens the door to a postmodern strain of skepticism that will become increasingly central to Weil's critique. Here that skepticism concerns the long-vaunted objectivity of the museum as a source of knowledge about objects. "To an extent not hitherto suspected," he writes, "we must face the possibility that, despite all our goodwill, the assumptions and biases that color our larger social and political views may also color our simplest and most basic acts of identification and classification" (1990, 53).

Much hangs on this admission, of course: if the museum's perspective is no longer presumed to be objective, then it can't claim exclusive ownership of meaning. The museum's "clients" (Weil uses the word purposefully) might also have something to say. "Rather than holding itself forth as the authoritative or exclusive source of historical interpretation or aesthetic judgment, the museum would hope to enlist the visitor as a collaborator who might, in turn, develop his own sense of heritage, causality, connectedness, and taste" (1990, 55).

Here, and with increasing force in subsequent essays, Weil argued that the museum would stand to gain rather than lose by becoming more modest in its claims, not only of objectivity but also of universality, inevitability, linguistic transparency, and metaphorical completeness—all treasured tropes that were, and still are, deeply embedded in the rhetoric of many museums. Weil hoped to replace them with an ethos of candid subjectivity (still based in scholarship, to be sure, but with the scholars revealed as breathing, fallible humans), localness, contingency, linguistic self-consciousness, and acknowledge-

ment that the museum's intellectual boundaries are actively, even arbitrarily placed. Writing in 1991 with the urgency of someone discovering dizzying new truths for the first time, Weil pointed out

. . . the degree to which it is human choice—and, with choice, a concomitant responsibility—that lies at the heart of the museum enterprise. . . . To me, that seems both an exhilarating and humbling way to think about museum work: exhilarating in the freedom that it provides us to shape reality to our several visions of it, and humbling in the need to understand that this freedom is not ours alone" (1995, 17).

If that slightly antique phrasing still strikes us as director-like, its substance is clearly influenced by the cultural theorists of the French academic left, whose names begin to appear in Weil's prose at around this time: Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and especially the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose book *The Love of Art: Art Museums and Their Public* Weil reviewed in *Museum News* in 1993. Rather than bristling at Bourdieu's "implacable assault on the very rationalizations and self-justifications of culture itself" (Fredric Jameson's description, quoted by Weil), Weil seems to admire its uncompromising extremity. "Bourdieu. . . does not simply contend that the fine arts. . . have been appropriated by the 'cultivated classes' as a means to establish their own social position. To the contrary, what he appears to argue is that these cultural manifestations may not, in fact, have any cultural value in themselves" (1995, 77). Such value is altogether constructed by those in cultural authority and imputed to certain objects or practices and not others. Weil doesn't argue; he asks what implications all this might have for museums.

He makes his sympathy with Bourdieu's critique more overt in a major lecture, "On a New Foundation: The American Art Museum Reconceived," given the same year at the University of Michigan. He suggests that art museums can't win by trying to refute the charges of the cultural theorists and other attackers, since those charges don't "ring as entirely false" (1995, 107). Instead, they should attempt to sidestep the charges while reconceiving the museum on a fresh set of premises—namely, making it a "site of open discourse" rather than a megaphone for one-way transmission of cultural information; loosening the exclusivity of the "aesthetic" approach to admit other ways of interpreting and experiencing; expanding the range of objects displayed so that education becomes more than just a buzzword; and widening the museum's mission to embrace the "uniquely human capacity for creative transformation" rather than limiting it to "the human genius of the few" (1995, 108). Interestingly, in this lecture Weil describes the leftist critique using metaphors of combat and violence: the museum's premises have been "battered" by "critical assault," which has been "damaging" and threatens the public and private patronage essential to its "survival" (1995, 88). We can only guess whether he was in fact ambivalent about the subversion of cultural authority to which he responded so imaginatively.

Weil's own questions get tougher and less rhetorical over the next few years. Calling for "hardball" rather than those creampuff questions, he asks whether museums are relatively more worthy than the myriad of other things society might do with its time and money. "Could some other organization (not necessarily a museum) make a similar or even greater contribution at a lesser cost?" Might the whole museum system "simply

be the hangover of some old and still-to-be-fully examined habit?" (1995, 34). Spurred and freed by his encounters with the postmodern critics—as well as by “a profound and ongoing shift” in the broader nonprofit sector about how organizations are expected to demonstrate their worth—Weil works to deconstruct museums’ traditional case for support. The vagueness and especially the open-endedness of their stated missions make both success and failure impossible to define. How could we tell whether a museum that seeks “to encourage an understanding and appreciation of contemporary art,” for example, is doing its job? When could it be said to have accomplished that goal—the way, for example, a local anti-poverty organization could be said to be finished when the need underlying its existence is no longer felt in the community it serves?

Weil’s point isn’t that problems like poverty can finally be eradicated; it’s that at least we would know what success would look like, because we understand such problems as public needs, and we can track our progress toward such goals. Without some meaningful “outcome” figure to compare to the “inputs” of money and other resources, museums can demonstrate neither effectiveness nor efficiency. Yet if they turn to education as their primary mission, at least for the purposes of justifying support, they leave themselves vulnerable to “the claims of more traditional educational institutions that these latter could. . . deliver a comparable value at a fraction of the cost” (1990, 36). Moreover, Weil points out, it won’t be enough to choose a mission that is important to the museum; it must be important to the public that the museum serves. Museums will thrive, Weil concludes, only when they can provide a compelling answer to the question, “To what ongoing public need is this institution a response?” (1995, 37). Such an answer would place the museum on a secure footing with respect to both kinds of “questioning forces” that Weil has been concerned with: the academic dismantling of old cultural verities and the nonprofit world’s newly-acquired skepticism about value.

That question about the nature of the public need or needs from which the museum derives both its purpose and its authority echoes throughout Weil’s later pages. He never answers it explicitly, insisting instead that each museum must find the right answer for itself, since each community will have a different range of needs and require different ways of meeting them. No monolithic, universalist approach will do. But he does continue to grapple with the question’s implications and corollaries. One of the more destabilizing of these is the idea that the museum, if it is essentially a response to values external to itself rather than a generator of its own values, is morally neutral.

[T]here is nothing inherently virtuous about museum work. It is simply a technology, a body of knowledge about how to accomplish certain things. Like any technology, judgments about its value must depend on the ends for which. . . it is used. In this respect, museum work closely resembles teaching (is it per se good to teach anything, even the most up-to-date methods of torture, or the mechanics of terrorism?), publishing, and broadcasting (1995, xv).

This too will be recognized as a characteristic Weilean idea, and its emergence in 1995 in the introduction to Weil’s third collection, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, coincides with his retirement from day-to-day museum administration and his move to a think-tank role as emeritus senior scholar at the Smithsonian’s Center for Education and Museum Studies.

There, presumably, he enjoyed greater freedom for philosophical reflection, in terms of both time and reduced intellectual dissonance. We can imagine how difficult it must be to run an art museum while very publicly hollowing out the most entrenched and comforting self-justifications of your local, national, and international colleagues.

Certainly we see, in the next few years, an increasingly radical series of moves in Weil's essays. In a trio of hauntingly unresolved parables published as "warm-up exercises" in *Museum News* in 1996, Weil reaches a nadir of doubt verging—if we take his figurative method seriously—on crisis. One of these pieces, "Fantasy Islands," literalizes the question, What if museums didn't exist? and offers no answer—not, I think, because Weil was slyly keeping his own answer up his sleeve, but because he didn't have one to give (2002, 53). Another, "A Parable of Rocks and Reasons," reduces the museum enterprise to an image of obscure drudgery involving the loading of rocks into a truck (2002, 99). Weil is mercilessly clearing the conceptual ground so that something new can be built.

Not coincidentally, the next year, 1997, was something of an *annus mirabilis* for Weil: he wrote or delivered four major papers that represent, collectively, the outline of a new framework. In roughly chronological order, they are: "Romance versus Realism: A Reflection on the Nature of Museums," "The Museum and the Public," "Museums: Can and Do They Make a Difference?" and "New Words, Familiar Music: The Museum as Social Enterprise." Announcing that the "ultimate 'so what' questions are finally here and with us" (2002, 56), Weil borrows again from the emerging language of nonprofit accountability to argue that the only viable museological ideal is "seek[ing] to improve the quality of people's lives" (2002, 61). A good museum is one that makes a "positive difference," where both "positive" and "difference" are clearly formulated and described in terms of particular, if not always quantifiable, intended outcomes (2002, 62). Yet Weil also recognizes—in a vivid passage about various visitor reactions to a hypothetical exhibition of Greek and Roman pottery—that unintended outcomes can also be valuable:

Unless we are to adopt some puritanical point of view that denounces as illegitimate all of a visitor's responses to a museum visit beyond those narrow, didactic ones intended by its program staff, we have to acknowledge that the totality of what goes on in a museum—the myriad interactions between visitors and objects, the equally myriad interactions of visitors with one another—is a far headier mixture than much of our museum literature suggests. . . . It would be a wonderful irony if all those distractions, which the more narrowly education-minded among us think of as static, turned out instead to be some of the museum's most important and memorable music (2002, 66).

So there is a tension between the need for the museum to determine in advance the outcomes that it "hopes and expects" to achieve (and against which it will evaluate its performance), and the equally desirable multiplicity of the public's experiences and uses of the museum. Although Weil never quite reconciles this tension, he does use it to prod museums to think more broadly about the kinds of outcomes they might elect to intend in the first place.

Crucial to Weil's logic in these four essays is a notion that he finds, almost in pass-

ing, in Drucker: the distinction between “primary” and “secondary customers.” Weil had already been asserting the primacy of the public in the hierarchy of museum constituencies, but Drucker’s stark categories gave him a new tool to recast the museum’s priorities. Staff members, trustees, volunteers, and even donors are strictly in the “secondary” group, meaning that providing value to them, while not unimportant, must take a back seat to providing value to the “primary” customers, the visitors. The museum must begin to think of itself as a servant and the public as its master (2002, 196). This inversion will require museum professionals to abandon current models of the museum’s relationship to society—in Weil’s taxonomy, the Museum as Establishment, the Museum as Treasure House, and the Museum as Presenter—and embrace a new model that Weil calls the Museum as Social Enterprise. Such a museum would “draw its legitimacy from what it does rather than what it is, would seek public support not as a matter of right but by offering to provide the public with value in exchange, might be open to challenge as a matter of course, and. . . would expect to be held accountable for every aspect of its operations.” Regarding its collections as means rather than ends, this entrepreneurial museum would measure itself “not merely by its good intentions” but by the impact it achieved (2002, 80).

Weil’s post-1997 writings—at least those included in his last collection, *Making Museums Matter*—seem to take a valedictory breath; they become more pragmatic and equable, as if Weil were trying to help museums find livable solutions to the challenges he had leveled. Several of those writings glance back admiringly at the work of John Cotton Dana, the founder of the Newark Museum and (in Weil’s description) curmudgeonly iconoclast whose museological views display deep affinities with Weil’s own. An eloquent champion of community-oriented museum priorities, Dana presaged Weil’s notion (or perhaps Weil was influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by Dana’s legacy before he himself began writing about Dana) that art museums must be “both useful and accountable” (2002, 87), not “store-houses” and “emblems of culture” but “work-shops” where average people can learn and find delight (2002, 189).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Weil was heartened by Dana’s ability to maintain his idealism even though it placed him well outside the pale of his profession. In an essay from the same period, “From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody” (1999), Weil unapologetically places himself at one “extreme” of the range of views about change in the museum field, among

. . . those workers who question whether the museum truly is an inherently good organization (or whether it has any inherent qualities at all) and whether the traditional activities of preservation, interpretation, and scholarship have any value in a museum context, apart from their capacity to contribute to an outcome external to the museum itself (2002, 30).

It’s hard not to recall the position of those protesters at the 1970 AAM meeting. Of course, there are important differences between Weil’s stance and what little we know of theirs. But the echoes are audible, and we would not be exaggerating to describe Weil’s project as a revolutionary one. Those podium-storming radicals ushered Weil into the museum world with a demand that museums’ considerable resources—from collections and iconic buildings to intellectual and human capital—be turned outward and yoked to a com-

mon cause. Thirty years later, with infinitely greater nuance, logic, and authority—and, remarkably, from a position within the field itself—Weil demanded something kindred of the same audience.

## 2. Matters of Technique

The foregoing sketch of developments in Weil's thought is by no means comprehensive. Its two most glaring omissions, perhaps, are in the areas of aesthetics, where Weil tried to offer a humanizing alternative to the Kantian/formalist aesthetics that had become the bedrock assumption of curatorial practice (his notion of "artistry" calls for a paper of its own); and deaccession, with its nimbus of legal, ethical, historical, and financial issues, which Weil used as a magnifying glass to scrutinize museums' multiple loci of responsibility and political power.

But we must move on to an examination of his rhetorical methods and strategies. The subject of *how* Weil wrote is not parenthetical to the subject of *what* he wrote about, because the extent to which he influenced his colleagues in the field is due in no small part to his ability to get us to pay close and frequent attention to him in the first place, both on paper and at the podium. A less gifted communicator might have been given fewer opportunities to contribute to and inflect our discourse, and surely would have had more trouble bringing us along with him onto the thin, shifting ice of change—or, for that matter, into the arcane realms of tax policy, copyright law, or international property repatriation, realms which, it turns out, there was good reason for museum people to explore.

Chief among Weil's rhetorical strategies was his eminent reasonableness, a tone of sober, judicious appraisal grounded in old-fashioned empiricism—lawyerly in the best Atticus Finch sense—that disarms objections before his listeners or readers might raise them. We're just speculating about a few obvious facts, he seemed to say, nobody's drawing any conclusions. Avoiding assertion in favor of speculation ("I find myself questioning whether. . .") and inhabiting both sides of the argument with equal credibility ("some museum people will disagree. . ."), he led us through a series of questions so sensible that we hardly realized how far we had gone until we found ourselves agreeing with an "obvious" point that was somehow utterly unfamiliar.

As I've argued in the previous section, however, Weil's questioning could also be much more than a rhetorical pose. By the end it was an epistemological position: Each museum could come to know its purpose only by asking the fundamental questions about service and finding the answers in the needs of the community it serves. Different kinds of questions have different functions in Weil's work, and the way he deployed them changed over time.

Not that Weil's tone was too sober for humor. A current of playful wit, sometimes dryly satirical and sometimes laugh-out-loud funny, ran through his prose, and this, too—however naturally it may have come to Weil—helped to lower our guard and win our complicity in what might otherwise have seemed too radical a project. Nowhere was this humor more overt (or more strategic) than in Weil's hypotheticals. One of these,

"The Museum at the End of Time," an undated piece in *Making Museums Matter* (2002, 136–140), satirizes the typically blinkered perspectives of various museum department heads as they try to cope with the sudden elimination of the field's most venerable self-justification: the idea that it serves future generations by preserving collections. There will be no future generations because, as the museum's director notes in a memo to the staff, the universe is scheduled to end in 2025. Characteristically, this exercise admits multiple interpretations. Weil's own discussion questions at the end of the piece suggest he intended it to help museum professionals think more deeply about their institutions' responsibility to future generations, but the opposite reading—that it's about how we fail to pay the right sort of attention to the needs of today's audiences—seems better aligned with Weil's broader themes. In either case, the exercise lingers in the memory because the humor (which bubbles up from the contrast between the absurdity of the fictional situation and the mundane, wholly "in character" reactions of the staff) licenses us to suspend our intellectualizing defenses and see ourselves in a disorienting mirror.

Weil understood that this would not be a comfortable process, as he wryly acknowledges in another such exercise, "Dangerous Hypo/thetical" (1995, 207–215), which concerns a new chemical treatment for bronze disease that may be extremely toxic to the museum workers exposed to it. Weil's clever reference to his own rhetorical medicine is clear: "Properly applied (a delicate process requiring that each application be varied depending on the contour, composition, and degree of deterioration of the object being treated), Hypo/thetical was far more effective in arresting this new form of bronze disease than any treatment previously available. Unfortunately, nobody on [the museum's] conservation staff was trained to do this work" (1995, 208).

Another striking feature of Weil's prose is its breadth of reference. He looked to other professions and sectors for examples of progressive change or courageous self-examination and brought these to the museum field as examples of what could be. His pages are peppered with familiar and unfamiliar names from philosophy, economics, literature, and other disciplines, usually to important effect. In one essay he refers to William Wordsworth, Walter Benjamin, William James, Alfred Barr, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Fernand Braudel—all in the space of three pages (1995, 128–130). He had a gift for analogy and metaphor, using them on a small scale to help a point click into place, as when he concludes a paragraph about the historical determination of an artist's style by suggesting that "the artist is like a link in a chain—free to move but only so far" (1995, 91), and on a large scale to structure and unify entire essays, as with the Minotaur image that begins and recurs throughout "Beauty and the Beast" (1993, 191).

Finally, Weil was a natural historian, possessed of enviable research talents as well as a storyteller's knack for vivid anecdote and dramatic narrative. "The American Legal Response to the Problem of Holocaust Art," an uninvitingly titled piece in *Making Museums Matter*, turns out to be a gripping, compact masterpiece of social and legal history, seemingly tossed off by Weil in response to a speaking invitation.<sup>4</sup> The pleasures of reading Weil are, most immediately, the pleasures of reading. The rare grace, clarity, learning, and affection of his voice are part of why the conference was held in his honor and why we and our successors in and around the world's museums will continue to pay attention for decades longer.

### 3. Afterimages

I promised to say a few words in closing about Weil's achievement and where his work leaves us. I also warned that those reflections will be provisional and partial. It is simply too early to know just what his impact will turn out to have been. Today, at least, a reader of Weil's published work may find himself of two minds about this question of influence. On the one hand, with respect to museum discourse, Weil's presence seems to loom so large that he must have faced a kind of Heisenbergian problem: the currents of thought he set out to observe and analyze had themselves been shaped by his own earlier observations and analyses. He writes in 1990, in the preface to *Rethinking the Museum*:

Throughout the museum field, there lately seems to have been a perceptible shift in focus away from the more technical aspects of day-to-day museum operations and toward the more fundamental questions of what a museum's purpose might be and what actual outcomes a museum might hope to achieve among its visitors and in its community (1990, xvi).

He can hardly be unaware that the description reads like a précis of his own agenda for museums, which he had been articulating by then for nearly 20 years. The question is not whether Weil's modesty prevented him from taking some credit for the situation he described. It is whether his findings as a diagnostician and his influence as a thinker can ever be teased apart. He credits Philip Nowlen with coining the phrase quoted earlier about "ultimate 'so what' questions," but it was Weil who forced those questions into the national and international dialogue about museums. Likewise, Weil's keen dissection of the museum field's desire to professionalize—to conceive of itself as a real "profession"—leaves out the fact that, by writing so powerfully about museums as such (museums as a coherent domain of theory and practice), Weil contributed to the creation of precisely the body of self-referring literature that is a prerequisite of any profession.

On the other hand, the extent of Weil's influence on actual museum practice seems more limited. Perhaps this is natural: change in discourse usually precedes change in practice. And Weil himself viewed concrete change as a relatively slow process. He predicted that the long-established power dynamic in which the museum is a tool of the socially "high" and powerful to exert cultural authority over the "low" will revolve a full 180 degrees, but he placed the time frame for that revolution at "probably not more than 40 to 50 years into the twenty-first century."

But it may also have something to do with the fact that Weil himself focused more on the museum world's principles than on its day-to-day actions. He may not always have been sufficiently skeptical about the ability of museums to translate their rhetoric into practice. "Decades of effort to diversify art museum audiences have shown little result," he lamented in 1996 (2002, 177), ascribing the problem to a failure of museum behavior to influence public response rather than a failure of museum rhetoric to influence museum behavior. But the kinds of changes that would make museums feel more welcoming to various underserved audiences had already been identified in various research studies. The question, as Weil himself might have put it, is one of relative values. Museum staffs, leaders, and trustees are certainly interested in diversifying audiences. But are they *more*

interested in that goal than in preserving a certain tenor of “specialness” or “elegance” at their institutions that makes them appealing to some segments of the public and unappealing to others? When push comes to shove, what values actually get enacted?

We might make a similar objection to Weil’s assertion, in the same lecture, that “whatever arrogance the museum may have once displayed toward the public has long since been converted to deference” (2002, 201). That formulation doesn’t allow for the possibility that the museum’s stance toward its public is one of deep ambivalence in which arrogance and deference commingle, and that the visible policies and practices of the museum are the results not of a new harmony with audiences but of an ongoing conflict among, and perhaps within, the individuals who control the museum. We might also note that the kinds of specific changes to museum practice that Weil called for three decades ago, such as “[g]reater candor by museums about what they think of the work they show” (1993, 39) and the signing of exhibit labels by those responsible for them (1993, 63), have worked their way into only a scattering of institutions.

It is in this sense that this appreciation, and probably any assessment of Weil’s career written so soon after his death, must be considered premature. To the extent that those kinds of changes do become more widespread over the next decade or so, as seems likely, we will be witnessing the continued fruition of Weil’s ideas. But in order to fully gauge that influence, we will need not only to listen to what museums say and think about how and why they function, as Weil urged us, but also to look just as probingly at what they do.

A more substantial qualification concerns the extent of Weil’s originality. I have been proceeding as if his speaking and writing career were a kind of soliloquy, albeit a generous and richly allusive one. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Weil was one participant in a larger conversation, as he himself referred to it (2002, 97), which was going on vigorously enough before he joined it. In fact, that conversation included direct antecedents of ideas we have come to think of as Weilean, and Dana is not the only such example. Consider these lines from the museum scholar Alma Wittlin (1899–1990), written in 1970, one year before Weil began publishing his own essays:

The term museum is neither better nor worse than the term club or center. . . . Museums are man-made institutions in the service of men; they are not ends in themselves. While a recent letter from the White House requested an inquiry into the unmet needs of America’s museums, I propose to vary the question, and to ask, “What can museums do with regard to unmet needs of people?” Within this very wide area every individual museum may decide on its share of intended accomplishment, and of resources required to reach its goals. Few individual institutions, if any, can be all things to all men. . . . Purposes have to be clearly defined in keeping with now existing needs (Wittlin 1970, 203–204).

In the context of this appreciation, we can be excused for reading this as a “prequel” to many of Weil’s themes. We don’t need to know whether Weil read Wittlin or simply came to similar conclusions about museums; the more general point is that his thinking grew out of a long tradition of museological debate and reciprocal influence among commentators and colleagues. It is symptomatic of that complex exchange that the phrase

for which Weil is most widely known—"from being *about* something to being *for* somebody"—wasn't Weil's own coinage but a third-hand quotation from Michael Spock via Joanne Cleaver (2002, 43).

Yet if Weilean ideas were already in the air, then why was Weil the first to make them heard so widely? How did he manage to shape the museum field's discourse around those ideas when others voicing a similar message had failed to do so? Part of the answer is, as I've already suggested, his extraordinary rhetorical sensitivity: he knew how to communicate challenging, even radical ideas in ways that wouldn't put his audience on the defensive. Another factor may be that the profession wasn't ready to listen to Alma Witlein in the 1950s and 1960s, just as it wasn't ready to listen to John Cotton Dana decades earlier. Weil's ideas may have gained currency in part because they reflected (even as they influenced) the museum field's movement toward new ideas about itself—a movement that may have been an inevitable outgrowth of the social, intellectual, economic, and technological changes of the decades during which Weil happened to be writing.

In that light, Weil can be seen as a kind of spokesman for a new, public-spirited identity that the museum profession (or some within it, at any rate) hoped to adopt. Perhaps it would not be too cynical to wonder whether at least part of the field's embrace of Weil stemmed from its desire to "outsource" the creation of a progressive agenda to a willing third party, whose authoritative scrutiny would legitimize museums' intentions so that their practices could continue more or less unchanged.<sup>5</sup>

If Weil was merely one voice in the ongoing conversation about museums, he was also one of its wisest. His departure leaves a palpable silence. Thankfully, we have the essays. In one of them Weil wrote the following about John Cotton Dana, lines which, with a simple change of name, might aptly express our thoughts about Weil himself: "Only now, with Dana's writings in hand, can we realize how much we miss him, how badly we need to hear his views. No serious conversation about museums may ever again be possible without his participation" (2002, 192).

## Notes

1. In addition to the four books listed in the References section at the end of this paper, Weil co-authored, with Franklin Feldman, *Art Works: Law, Policy, Practice* (New York: Practising Law Institute, 1974), which quickly became an influential legal text, and edited *A Deaccession Reader* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1997).
2. Hilde Hein has observed that this is why Weil later rubbed so many conservative art museum leaders—such as the contributors to *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Cuno 2003)—the wrong way. He could have been one of them; from their point of view he must have been a turncoat.
3. Another thinker who would seem to have been a "natural" for Weil to write about is the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Dewey is well-known to museum educators through his 1934 book *Art as Experience*, which counters the narrowly Kantian-formalist aesthetics that had by then become (and are largely still) the

bedrock of curatorial practice at art museums. Dewey takes on this orthodoxy via his own more life-entangled, less disciplinary approach. His utilitarian views resonate broadly with Weil's argument for a more functionalist view of museums generally, including non-art museums.

4. Actually, three speaking invitations: the Jane Ruby Humanities Lecture at Wheaton College in Massachusetts; Brown University's commencement weekend; and the Institute of Art and Law Annual Lecture at the National Gallery in London (all 1998 and 1999). The finished piece was published in the journal *Art, Antiquity and Law* in December 1999.
5. This idea is borrowed in part from Elaine Gurian, who, at the Weil conference in Victoria, suggested to the attendees that not merely Weil himself but all museum professionals who espouse his ideas and allow themselves to feel better about the profession on account of his work, may be the "patsies" in the larger museum field's game of appeasement-without-real-change. "If, after 10 minutes in a poker game, you don't know who the patsy is," Gurian told the conference, "then you're the patsy." If her language sounds harsh, consider how little the ethnic and socio-economic composition of, say, art museum audiences has changed since Weil began writing in the early 1970s.

## References

- Bloom, J., E. Powell, E. Hicks, and M. E. Munley. 1984. *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.
- Cuno, J., ed. 2003. *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Weil, S. E. 1990. *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Beauty and the Beasts: On Museums, Art, the Law, and the Market*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries into Museums and Their Prospects*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *Making Museums Matter*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. Art as mirror and gateway: The role of the docent. Unpublished address. Art Institute of Chicago. April 2005.
- Wittlin, A. S. 1970. A twelve-point program for museum renewal. Reprinted in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, 2004, G. Anderson, ed., 44–60. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.