

Thinking out loud: Networks, transparency, and soft and loud sounds

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It seems that thinking about museums is gaining momentum. The political, social, and cultural realities of societies worldwide, combined with the effects of global climate change, have forced museums to reflect upon their positions. This discussion is taking place out loud; the very identity of museum work is at stake.

Challenging the Authorized Heritage Discourse

Laurajane Smith has coined the term 'Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD) to refer to the dominant discourse in the professional field;¹ AHD concerns the rhetoric that emerged in the early 20th century, more or less. Key publications in this respect are Benjamin Gilman's *Museum ideals* (1918) and the *Muséographie* conference's report from 1934. This discourse is very much related to the initiatives to establish museum work (i.e., museology) as a profession. This rhetoric's basic concepts concern an authority that is based on academic knowledge, scientific accountability, objectivity, and neutrality.

This AHD has increasingly been challenged since the 1970s by what is generally referred to as the 'New Museology movement'. It would not be too bold to state that the perspective of the professional discourse has shifted 180 degrees. The AHD is mainly a Global North-specific discourse; the countermovement is strongly inspired by discourses from the Global South. A key moment in this respect was the *Round Table on the Development and Role of Museums in the Contemporary World*, which was organized by UNESCO in Santiago de Chile, 20–31 May, 1972.

1 Laurajane Smith: *Uses of Heritage*.

In recent years, a myriad number of publications have expressed a new urgency to critically reflect upon museums' social role, not least as a result of the pressure to decolonize. This resulted in various attempts to (re)define museums.

The socially purposeful museum

In 2001, the Museum Studies Department of Leicester University introduced the concept of the 'socially purposeful museum':

"The socially purposeful museum is a dynamic, vital institution that has rich relationships with diverse audiences; that nurtures participatory and co-creative practice and is part of people's everyday lives; that seeks to foster progressive social values and, at the same time, is widely recognised as a site for dialogue and debate; that works collaboratively with a range of institutions within and beyond the cultural sector to engender vibrant, inclusive and more just societies".²

This is a clear statement against the traditional "essentialist agenda" that is reflected in the International Council of Museums' classical definition, which emphasizes functions rather than its social role. This definition focussed on preservation, research, and communication having no explicit social purpose other than a commitment to knowledge and enjoyment.

The Leicester-approach had a significant worldwide impact through publications, students, and research projects. Museum professionals from many countries received (part of their) training in Leicester, not least because English has become our contemporary world's *lingua franca*. The emphasis on museums' social role of challenged museums to adopt a more active social, even activist, agenda.

Many books written from an activist social perspective are published by Routledge, such as *Re-presenting disability: activism and agency in the museum* (2010), edited by Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and *Museum Activism* (2019), edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell. Routledge started in 2017 with a special series *Museum in Focus* offering "a platform for approaches that radically rethink the relationships between

2 Jocelyn Dodd: The socially purposeful museum, p. 28.

cultural and intellectual dissent and crisis”.³ The texts are consistent with the approach as reflected in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies* (2015) and *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics* (2011).

Defining museums

In this light, it is interesting that, when in September 2019 at the General Conference of the International Council of Museums in Kyoto a proposal for a new museum definition was presented, very much following this line of thought, strong opposition was voiced, which resulted in the withdrawal of the proposal. This opposition demonstrates that the Authorized Heritage Discourse is still a leading perspective for many museum professionals.⁴

The old definition (2007) read as follows:

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”

Apart from the addition of intangible, and the replacement of “man” by “humanity”, the 2007 definition is basically the same one adopted in 1951 when the organisation (founded in 1946) first formulated its definition. The 2019 proposal was far more programmatic:

3 Routledge, *Museums in Focus*: <https://www.routledge.com/Museums-in-Focus/book-series/MIF?publishedFilter=alltitles&pd=published,forthcoming&pg=2&pp=12&so=pub&view=list> last accessed on 20/11/2022. The 16 titles published thus far include, for example, *The disobedient museum* (Kylie Message, 2017), *Sharing authority* (Michelle Horwood, 2018), *Queering the museum* (Nikki Sullivan & Craig Middleton, 2019) and *Museums and racism* (Kylie Message, 2021).

4 The proposal was prepared by a working group, with Jette Sandahl as chairperson, involving museum professionals and others from around the world. The 3-year process that led to this proposal and its discursive framework was documented in a special issue of *Museum International*: “The museum definition: the backbone of museums” (vol. 71, issue 1–2), <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rmil20/71/1-2?nav=tocList> (10/01/2023).

“Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.”

A new proposal was adopted at the ICOM General Assembly held in Prague in August 2022 after many discussions and turmoil. The new official definition is very much a compromise between the old definition and the proposal from 2019:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

Comparing the 2019 and 2022 versions immediately makes clear that the leading powers in ICOM opted for a more conservative agenda: “Aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing” was reduced to: “foster diversity and sustainability”, and: “they are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities” was reduced to: “they operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities”. What has completely disappeared are the references to a: “critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures” and the aims of: “acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present”.

This is not the place for a more detailed analysis of the new definition and the process leading thereto.⁵ Such analysis is complex, since it would need to

5 See, among others, Tom Seymour: What is a museum? ICOM finally decides on a new definition. The Art Newspaper 24.08.2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/08/24/what-is-a-museum-icom-finally-decides-on-a-new-definition> (10.01.2023). See

deal with discussions on three levels. The first level concerns the discussion about definitions' role and structure and, by extension, how inclusive or exclusive a definition should be. The second level concerns the tension between theory (discourse) and practice: are all museums able (or willing) to comply with the requirements? The third level involves striking a balance between the museum field's progressive and conservative approaches, as well as striking a balance between the different ideological systems on a global scale. Still, a comparison between the three versions of the museum's definition (2007, 2019, 2022) highlights some of the key issues in the current debate on the social role of museums.

Intellectual hypothesis

The overall principle that can be applied to the current practice of the museum is aptly described by Fiona Cameron, who states: “[...] where distant others are made proximate [...], new cosmopolitical configurations made up of diverse actors coalesce, each exhibiting both common and differing worldviews, values, and knowledge that are making an incursion into the museum. Museums must accommodate and embrace different worldviews and see conflict and dissent as operative in complex networks as both intentional and unruly dynamical forces”.⁶

This is in line with how the publisher Routledge introduced the publications of the *Museums in Focus* series on its website and at the beginning of each book, we find: “the intellectual hypothesis that museums are not innately ‘useful’, ‘safe’, or even ‘public’ places, and that recalibrating our thinking about them might benefit from adopting a more radical and oppositional form of logic and approach”.⁷ Routledge adds that: “Examining this problem requires a level of comfort with (or at least tolerance of) the ideas of dissent, protest, and radical thinking”,⁸ in other words: getting comfortable being uncomfortable.

The well-known slogan “Museums are not neutral” is an expression of this same intellectual hypothesis. The slogan became popular through a T-shirt

also *Museologica Brunensia* 11, 2022, (1). <https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/handle/11222.digilib/digilib.77017> (10.01.2023).

6 Fiona Cameron: The liquid museum, p. 350.

7 See note 3.

8 Ibid.

campaign by Mike Murawski and La Tanya Autry in 2017. The movement's aim was to: "Expose the myth of museum neutrality and demand ethics-based transformation across institutions".⁹

From allyship to insurgency

The aforementioned slogan is not just an observation; it is much more a battle cry that is in line with the view that museums should be agents of social change.¹⁰ This presupposes a reflection on the relation with what Erica Lehrer has described as the: "communities of implication".¹¹ Lehrer introduced this term to address: "the insufficiency of [...] museum frameworks" in relating objects to people, in particular concerning objects that express "enduring legacies of intergroup violence", as is the case in ethnographic museums.¹² It does not challenge either the concept of legal or intellectual ownership. An object's creator of and a colonial administrator who confiscated it are both implicated, but both parties cannot claim equal ownership rights. In this respect, Wendy Ng, Syrus Ware, and Alyssa Greenberg have elaborated upon the concept of allyship.¹³ The authors aim to develop: "practical strategies for enacting equitable relationships with visitors and staff across lines of social difference, providing a blueprint for a rigorous approach to how museum educators can activate diversity and inclusion to create social change".¹⁴ It would be interesting to use the concept in a broader context, including issues of ownership and implication, because the concept of allyship requires a clear definition of responsibility and accountability: does the museum want to be an ally of the creator or the colonial administrator?

Ng, Ware, and Greenberg define allyship as: "a way of working together, across multiple identities, to create work environments, programming, and exhibition content that embrace all humanity, specially racialized and marginalized peoples, from a social justice lens".¹⁵ Basically, the museum must be: "an ally to racialized and marginalized communities". In an ethnographical

9 See <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/> (20.11.2022).

10 Mike Murawski: Museums as agents of social change.

11 Erica Lehrer: *Material Kin*, p. 290.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

13 Wendy Ng, Syrus M. Ware, Alyssa Greenberg: *Activating Diversity and Inclusion*.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 143–144.

context, these are often the “source communities” (i.e., of the collections’ communities of origin). The authors consider empathy to be the heart of allyship.¹⁶ Recently, however, the concept of insurgency has been introduced in the museological discourse as a challenge to the way in which authors like Ng, Ware and Greenberg use the concept of “empathy”.¹⁷

“Insurgency” emerged in the 1990s as a concept in the discussion of citizen participation in the neoliberal era, in particular with regards to city planning. As Faranak Miraftab states: “To promote social transformation, insurgent planning has to disrupt the attempts of neoliberal governance to stabilize oppressive relationships through inclusion. Insurgent planning, then, constitutes radical planning practices that challenge the inequitable specifics of neoliberal governance operating through inclusion. Insurgent planning should read through the bluff of neoliberal governance’s promise of inclusive citizenship”.¹⁸ Similarly, it can be argued that a real decolonization of museums cannot result from forms of participation in which co-curatorship is granted as gesture of tenured staff’s liberal benevolence.

Raw material for decolonization

Insurgent practices challenge the delicate balance between the museum’s responsibility, as a public institution, and the independence of invited activist participants, such as artists. The use of art(ists) to address complicated and sensitive issues is generally used as a way to explore new communication protocols:¹⁹ “Intersecting with literature and performance, but unique in its affective range, art is experiential and phenomenological, communicating in registers that defy empirical analysis. It is this ability which unleashes its political, or perhaps dissensual power”.²⁰

With its ‘Re-inventing GRASSI project’, the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde (Leipzig, Germany)²¹ explores the ways in which concepts such as

16 Ibid., p. 144.

17 Manuelina M. Duarte Cândido, Mélanie Cornelis, Édouard Nzoyihera: Les muséologies insurgées.

18 Faranak Miraftab: *Insurgent Planning*, p. 45.

19 About this concept, see Manuel Castells: *Museums in the Information Era*.

20 David Corbet: *The unquiet museum*, p. 7.

21 About the project, see Léontine Meijer-van Mensch: *In Bewegung*.

allyship and insurgency can be implemented.²² To this end, the museum has collaborated with the artist group PARA and the Tanzanian artists Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asiimwe Amani. PARA's intervention (*Moving Mountains*) revolves around the stone that the Leipzig geographer Hans Meyer took from atop Mount Kilimanjaro on October 6th, 1889.²³ The 1889 event is used as a *pars pro toto* for the appropriation of heritage and its subsequent removal of heritage to European (and North American) museums.

In 1889, present day Tanzania was a colony of Germany and Mount Kilimanjaro was the German Empire's highest mountain. Meyer was the first European to successfully climb the mountain. He had what he declared to be the peak of the Kilimanjaro cut in two, donating one part to Kaiser Wilhelm II and keeping the other part for himself. The half that was donated to the emperor has been lost; the other part ended up belonging to a Viennese antique dealer. PARA came up with the plan to buy the stone and to bring it back to Tanzania. PARA linked this to a plea for a radical decolonization of the museum by incorporating museum "substance" into replicas of Meyer's stone. The sale of these copies ("Skrupels") funded the purchase of the original from the antique dealer.

In consultation with the museum, PARA did not use part of the museum's building (a monument), but the former plinth (not a monument) of a bust of Karl Weule as a material for the replicas. Weule was director of the museum (1907–1926) and can be considered to be the personification of the museum's explosive growth of during the colonial period. Although the bust itself had been moved to the depot several years prior, critics still consider the destruction of the plinth to be an act of iconoclasm.

In most critical comments, no distinction is made between PARA's intentions and the museum's intentions. Some commentators have even suggested that PARA was commissioned by the museum director to destroy the plinth as: "rather an unlawful act of radical feminism than an act of decolonisation [sic!]"²⁴ the author Mueller-Straten suggested that the director intentionally

22 The museum will be redesigned extensively in the coming years. The 'Re-Inventing GRASSI project' will transform the museum into a 'Network Museum' in which different voices have the opportunity to speak and different regions have the ability to connect with each other. Underlying the narratives is the critical reflection on the ethnological collections, their acquisition, and exhibition history.

23 About the intervention see Marlen Hobrack: *Auge um Auge, Stein um Stein*.

24 Christian Mueller-Straten: *Heroes and Jacobines*.

aimed to discredit her (male) predecessors following a statement by the president and vice-president of ICOM-Germany.

However, it was never PARA's intention to discredit the memory of Weule *per se*. It was also not the director's explicit intention to do so either. That the plinth was used in PARA's performance added to the symbolism, albeit as a side issue. As explained by Dan Hicks, it is part of a broader museological strategy. He states: "We must find new collective ways to reimagine the very fabric of the ruins of anthropology's project of cultural whiteness and the museums that represent its public spaces. And not just as an inherited resource to be reinterpreted or recontextualized but [...] as 'raw material'".²⁵ In other words, it is not just the intellectual content of its exhibitions, but the museum's very substance as such. As Anna Brus puts it: "With the motto Re-inventing GRASSI, the reopening sought to usher in a radical new process of restructuring. By physically modifying the premises, it sought to create a physical foundation for the transformation of the museum into a space for controversy. In other words, the artists took the new director at word".²⁶ Anna Brus' rather ironic statement points to the core of the problem: the tension between the independence and freedom of expression of the artists and the responsibility of the museum (director). Embracing the principle of insurgency makes this tension more visible. Museum directors are not independent, by definition, and their responsibility involves accountability to a multitude of stakeholders. The present ICOM Code of Ethics hardly provides useable guidelines. It is my personal conviction that the issue will accompany us in the years to come; failure is an inescapable and necessary part of the process.

Transparency

The principles of allyship and of the socially purposeful museum resonate in a *Manifest* drafted in 2020 by students of the MA Art Education, Curatorial Studies program of the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (Zurich University of the Arts).²⁷

25 Dan Hicks: Unmasking a History of Colonial Violence in a German Museum.

26 Anna Brus: Iconoclasm in the Grassi Museum.

27 The *Zürcher Manifest* was the outcome of the module „Aktuelle Diskurse Ausstellen und Vermitteln“. See Léontine Meijer-van Mensch: Das Zürcher Manifest 2020.

The *Manifest* asks, among others, for transparency: “We want to take a stand and make previously hidden structures visible”. Transparency, or rather “radical transparency”, is identified as one of the cornerstones of 21st century museum ethics in the *Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*: “Radical transparency is a liberatory antidote to the assumed alignments and readability of knowledge. Radical transparency not only describes but also analyses behaviour and consider its significance. It is a mode of communication that admits accountability – acknowledgement and assumption of responsibility for actions”.²⁸ The concept of transparency’s inclusion in the museum definition proposal from 2019 shows how much this proposal is embedded in the contemporary museum discourse and practice. Still, the concept did not appear in the list of 20 key concepts and terms to be included in a new definition, as circulated among the members of ICOM-Germany.²⁹ In any event, the concept was not included in the version of the definition that was adopted by the ICOM General Assembly in August 2022.

Transparency should include a reflection on the museum’s history; as the *Manifest* states: “Narratives that are assumed to be true should be questioned and thought of from multiple perspectives”. Ethnographical museums, for example, cannot escape the responsibility of critically discussing colonial times’ collecting practices and the role played by former museum directors and of private collectors as donors. However, it also, and perhaps even more so, demands an effort to show how colonial modes of thinking are still reflected in museum practices – from the language that is used to the conservation treatments. It spans from very small, albeit important, adjustments in exhibition texts, to the decision not to display certain parts of the collection, such as human remains, but also plaster casts of the heads of people once made to illustrate racist theories, as well as colonial photographs.

According to Wendy Ng, Syrus Ware, and Alyssa Greenberg, critical self-reflection is a fundamental process in being an ally: “We must clearly recognize and understand our individual identities and our positionality.”³⁰ In their view, this critical self-reflection may well be messy. The message is that museum professionals should be: “getting comfortable being uncomfortable”. Transparency generates accountability in policies, processes, and practices

28 Janet Marstine: The contingent nature of the new museum ethics, p. 14.

29 See Markus Walz: The ICOM museum definition.

30 Wendy Ng, Syrus M. Ware, Alyssa Greenberg: Activating Diversity and Inclusion, p. 146.

and contributes to creating a relationship with a diversity of communities based on trust.³¹

The networked museum

The concept of transparency occupies the core of new communication protocols – and by extension the core of the Network(ed) Museum. An important framework for this ideal – with an emphasis on the revolution in information and communication technologies – was provided by Manuel Castells in his seminal work *The Rise of the Network Society* (first edition 1996).

In a keynote lecture presented at the ICOM General Conference of 2001 (Barcelona), Castells explored the role played by museums in a network(ed) society. He concluded his lecture with the following statement, borrowed from Josep Ramoneda, director of the Barcelona Centre for Contemporary Culture: “museums can remain [...] ‘museum pieces’, or they can reinvent themselves as communication protocols for a new humankind”.³² Castells argues that: “we are witnessing the fragmentation of communication systems and of the codes of cultural communication existing between individual and collective subjects”.³³ As a possible response to this, he proposed a system of cultural communication protocols to translate from one code to another. This means that, first of all, museums have to be clear about their own codes (i.e., the specific language and methods that they employ in their work).

This is a necessary prerequisite for establishing a sustainable: “active partnership with and for diverse communities” (museum definition proposal 2019). Part of the ‘Re-inventing GRASSI project’ is the ambition of the Museum für Völkerkunde (Leipzig) to transform itself into a network museum. It is a way to: “accommodate and embrace different worldviews and see conflict and dissent as operative in complex networks as both intentional and unruly dynamic forces”.³⁴ It challenges organizational structures and professional competencies. As such, the ‘Re-inventing GRASSI project’ is not inventing – or contributing to the construction of – a new heritage discourse. Rather, it is an expression

31 Janet Marstine: The contingent nature of the new museum ethics, p. 17.

32 Manuel Castells: Museums in the Information Era, p. 7.

33 Ibid., p. 5.

34 Fiona Cameron: The liquid museum, p. 350.

of the conviction that reflection on museum work should unfold at the level of implementation, rather than at the level of discourse as such.







Figures

1) Grassimuseum. © GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig. Foto: Volkmar Heinze.

2–5) REINVENTING GRASSI.SKD: Moving Mountains. © GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig. Foto: Tom Dachs.