

TOMISLAV S. ŠOLA

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DOES NOT LIVE HERE  
ANY MORE

A GLOSSARY OF MUSEUM SINS

TO LELA



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Eternity does not live here any more - a glossary of museum sins

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*Criticism is easy, art is difficult*

## **Foreword, or the author's excuses for belated criticism**

"Once upon a time, when museums still committed mistakes..." - this should probably be a good start of a text to attract the reluctant reader (I could not resist my marketing concerns<sup>1</sup>, the term "Sins", featured in the title, indeed, allows for a more dramatic and accentuated reading in a professional ethics dimension). Had this book been published twenty years ago when it was conceived, it would have put me in an embarrassing position amidst much of the professional community. Though rebellious and just about resigning all my positions at that time, I was still part of the professional establishment. I had no courage, because I lacked conviction in the accuracy of my criticism. Advocating new theory and community museums practice, I was always opinionated and that wasn't often well received. I have tried to demonstrate it, especially in my lecturing. Whilst taking the Mission of heritage institutions very seriously one should take care to avoid being grim or forbidding in explaining the difficulties we encounter.

<sup>1</sup>Šola, Tomislav. *Marketing in Museums or about virtue and how to make it known*. Croatian Museum Society, Zagreb, pp 300, 2001.



"Blasphemy, yes, but it was funny."

*Published in The New Yorker 11/15/1993 by Charles Barsotti*

Ten years ago, when I exchanged the letters on this book with the present German publisher, it would still have been a timely book. But our lives are conditioned by many things. The war time was time lost in many ways, but at that, quite a PhD on human nature. The rest was time spent dispensing much effort on the promotion of excellence<sup>2</sup>. However, bits and parts did appear in my articles and books, though some were in Croatian. I have little intention to write ambitious scientific texts anymore, and instead, take pleasure in using "the broad brush" approach that is so often slighted by the serious academics. Besides, I have lectured regularly and widely about it, and generations of my students, together with many colleagues, have shared my concerns. Though the critique, thus far, has been euphemistic and rather unperceived, the reasons

<sup>2</sup>I never intended to run The Best in Heritage annual conference in Dubrovnik, which I was previously unsuccessful in proposing to various parties. When some of the best professionals I know claimed I was wrong to believe it could be a success I became dedicated to proving my case.; see: [www.TheBestInHeritage.com](http://www.TheBestInHeritage.com)

for this book are now somewhat limited. Many things have since undergone amazing improvements. Yet, even if it's only for those who have shared my critical views to see them compiled in one volume, then that is still reason enough for me. Thus, additional readers are sheer bonus. To all, I direct my humble, traditional plea *Lectori benevolo salutem*. Professionally, I dedicate this book to the memory of a great, amusing but relevant eccentric, the visionary publicist, a connoisseur of museums, and the most competent representative of museum users that I have known, Kenneth Hudson<sup>3</sup>. If he were living now, he would probably add: museums should survive upon public feedback, constantly improving their performance while delivering beneficial activities offered to their proper users and their society. But, often, they lack power (money, decision making, politics), they lack the ability and willingness to deliver attractive products to interested users, and they experience shortcomings in professionalism (philosophy, mission, unity, definition of domain, even of the job they do). Maybe we should make these defects more obvious so as to be able to move closer to better outcomes and realistic, yet idealistic visions.

<sup>3</sup>I have dedicated The Best in Heritage Conference to the ongoing memory of my mentors Georges Henri Riviere and Kenneth Hudson, both of whom I was lucky to know well; the first was my most inspiring teacher and the latter, a mentor and, I believe, a friend. He liked my list of 20-odd sins, which were first internationally presented at a conference in Brno in 1988.

The right of criticism is, besides being a moral framework, an inevitable quality of any open system and one that is successful in surviving changing circumstances. A lack of constant self-evaluation may lead to an inability to adjust and change, a deficiency that, as it seems, shatters the very future of the traditional museum. Happily enough, many museums, especially those in rich and developed countries, are not only new by way of the buildings or technology they use, but in their thinking and ensuing practices as well. To them, this account may serve as an imperfect reminder of their victories over obsolescence and inaptitude. Absorbed by their own conviction, creativity and professionalism, they often find themselves tempted to gauge performance by their own standards. They are still exemplary and extraordinary, but that alone is not enough to ensure a prosperous, convincing profession. They forget the East and South; their disadvantaged colleagues whose day-to-day difficulties call for some sort of reminder against probable mishaps, especially for those whose circumstances denote brave and creative careers marked by extreme tension and sacrifice. Poverty and historical misfortune have burdened many countries with obligations that pushed culture to the brink of social prioritisation and development and, thus, caused a "lack of understanding of the museum mission"<sup>4</sup>. These institutions and the

<sup>4</sup>Ripley. Dillon.S. *The Sacred Grove: Essays on Museums*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. Long ago, it existed in the developed world too and it may well return in some ways, at least in Europe, which will not be able to transform into a "state-less" mode of running the public culture domain.

professionals operating within them combat basic problems. They too will be adept to repeat most, if not all, of the mistakes of the advantageous world. Motivated by their progressivism, they will strive to catch up, only to encounter the same difficulties experienced by those who came before them. Therefore, in some cases, these belated critical observations may serve to list anticipated problems.

The creative professional elite often judges the state of the arts, and the mindsets surrounding it, by their own standards. They get offended by any measure of critique, assuming that they have already found the correct approach. Yet, any system has to be evaluated by the strength of its weakest parts<sup>5</sup>. This sensitivity, the automatic defensive attitude, testifies to the frailty of their position and the obliviousness to the totality of their trade, as well as the degree to which they unjustifiably judge by their own exemplar.

For some, indeed, this critique may well be obsolete, as we see instances of quality all around us today. But, as "the history of sins" title suggests, it may well serve as a professional reminder when facing the ongoing struggles that are necessary in order to pass on quality

<sup>5</sup>Professionalism is just that: an ability to judge the situation in its totality, disregarding its own significance; by the way, I use the term "elite" wherever possible as a positive quality, believing that any true elite would never succumb to "elitism", which would result in a disregard for others.

experiences and build a reputable profession. I also envisioned that judging the general situation of the rapidly shrinking world by occidental situations and ambitions would be relatively improper: the developing world is three times as big and much in the need of pragmatic assistance. Its circumstances rarely allow advancement towards the best practices of the Occident. Can this collection of ideas be of some use to them? Possibly. The West is in its full sway of decadence, by virtue of an unrestrained, unhindered and unbridled frenzy of obscene capitalism, - the savage time of Great Greed<sup>6</sup>. The core values of museums and heritage sites are high on the menu of this avaricious beast. The *civitas* can finally be destroyed.

If there was an argument in favour of the strong presence of a renewed theory of museums, one would find it in a lack of self-criticism and insight into the context the public memory institutions should refer to. Both are obligatory parts of any theory. Theory should project as much as it should evaluate. Theory itself coming first, followed by the circumstances which make it possible: the practice. A critical word here and there was often mentioned but scattered<sup>7</sup>. Those who

<sup>6</sup>I have created this syntagm in the early 90s and used it regularly in my writings and lecturing, hardly expecting that it will live to its grim apotheosis.

<sup>7</sup>Cork, Richard. What does Document a document? (Studio International., London, 1/1978. vol. 194., No. 988, pp 37-47), and Putar. Radoslav. Ne trebaju nam mamutske institucije. (Vjesnik, Zagreb, 19.2.1980) , Grenac, Davorka. 50. rođendan MOMA-e (Vjesnik, Zagreb, prosinac 1979. ; Hudson, Kenneth. Museums for the 80s. A Survey of the World's Trends. Paris, UNESCO, & London, McMillan Press, 1977. P98., to name the the few...

are radical enough to suffer the consequences of early criticism are rare: "Our museums are in desperate need of psychotherapy. There is abundant evidence of an identity crisis in some of the major institutions while the others are in an advanced state of schizophrenia"<sup>8</sup>. Another critic was referring to amassed messages in our galleries and something being wrong with our "emitters" while the "receivers" of the public were opened...<sup>9</sup>. This book is less an attempt at "nosology", - the systematics of professional imperfections, - and rather a systematization of lecture notes. Though any curator might claim to have known all these imperfections of the museums' past, it did seem worth the effort to individually identify and discuss them in one place.

<sup>8</sup>Cameron, Duncan F. *The Museum: temple or the forum*. Cultures, an international review, UNESCO, 1972. The author has indeed suffered many inconveniences due his non-conformist critique.

<sup>9</sup>Hume, Robert M. *Progressive Innovation: The Director's Viewpoint*, (Curator), Feb. 1969. vol.12. No. 1 p. 14



# **1. Is there a crisis in museums and heritage**

The crisis is evident where static models dominate and where dynamic quality therefore has little chance at success. Crisis is recognizable by orthodoxy and firm rules, by vibrant phenomena becoming still and by vowing to stabilise and eternalise values. It is the time when the restless, creative elite become the establishment, when avant-garde becomes nihilist, when care becomes obsession and tyranny, when rules become laws, when excellence becomes obligatory perfection, when uninhibited knowledge is turned into compulsory education....That is also just the correct moment to revitalize, innovate, question, doubt, and change. In fact, this kind of development is like a sinusoid of alternating tendencies, which are in constant struggle for adequate use of resources for the ever more apparent public benefit.

## **A low place in societal priorities**

This chapter intends to make clear, referring to a relatively simple body of ideas, particular areas of crisis which plague the museum institution. Or do they, indeed? One now sees only the proliferation of heritage and, particularly of museums. They have never been so beloved and never appeared in such numbers, as they spread everywhere. But, at the same

time, any profound transformation is by definition a crisis. In the last two or three decades, museums and the entire field of heritage, has undergone fundamental change: from conservative, educational institutions in which the object was paramount, to places of communication and public service, which are dedicated to the complex transfer of the socially formed collective memory. All of a sudden, the entrance to the heritage scene became congested by all the institutions and actions dealing with the care and communication of heritage. The change in the situation was caused by the new museology, the practice of ecomuseums, then prompted by the inclusion of marketing and finally, by the redefinition of heritage as also being intangible. To those at the cutting edge, having synchronised practice with these changes, most of these "sins" will seem more like obsolete lectures. Therefore, the readings may mean more to those who only declaratively signed on to the novelties, without interiorizing their far-reaching nature, and to others, who still grapple with the basic aspects of the (emerging) profession. Three thirds of the world suffers from the belief that culture and heritage come only after prosperity has settled in. Needless to say, the opposite has proven to be the case. Back in the eighties, in the magazine "Culture at Communication", there was a syntagm "la crise patrimoniale", reflecting the difficulties experienced by the sector in attempts to play a more important, appropriate role. It was explained at the wider level as

being "in fact, the crisis of desire for culture"<sup>10</sup>. Since then, the upsurge of cultural industries, together with the first wave of profit making cultural projects<sup>11</sup> has made culture the focal point of wider interests. Being the core part of any culture, heritage is seen as a product for possible sale. In fact, the "heritage industry" was realised in England almost three decades ago. The fact is that heritage management has gradually become a series of occupations. Some are regarded as responsible, ethical and justified, while those others will inevitably lead to its degeneration and destruction. How far can profit making go before it harms the very existence of culture and heritage? Out of this dilemma, the need for a distinct new profession was born. The story is a long one and it continues to gain momentum.

The prejudices toward culture, inasmuch as it has been deemed a luxury and accessible only to the rich, and consequently, that museums are viewed as overly expensive institutions, has evoked pressures that paved the way for temptation. Liberal capitalism which insists upon the effectiveness of any investment, burdens any (new) museum heavily with expectations, and initially, this pressure extorts encouraging results. The state has already started to contemplate the closure or privatisation of museums perceived to be inefficient. But we have neither the

<sup>10</sup>At the same time Theodore Roszak in his writings was telling about the "limping cultural sector".

<sup>11</sup>This has to be properly understood. We should be mostly referring to spin-off effects of cultural, or museum institutions as non-profit sector is not there with purpose to earn money. Money is bonus though, rightfully, more and more often a calculated consequence.

criteria, nor an organized profession, to protect ourselves. The reason for this forced reaction owes to the pauperisation of state, the imposition of profit logic and the neglect of key strategic goals for the welfare of society. This *oncosis* of public service may well affect public heritage institutions.

### **A job still ill-defined has problems**

There are internal reasons for the crisis and these are inherent in the very nature of the institution and the job it does. A number of closed-minded views from museum professionals derive from the fact that most of them are either enthusiasts or mere administrators. If they are not talented, the first of these two groups often suffer from dilettantism, whereas the latter have no understanding of the logic that can sustain museums. Museum professionals are, for the most part, experts in their basic scientific field, but have no sufficient understanding of the museum medium or heritage panorama. For the most part, museums are not scientific institutions. Their job is communication, which is carried out however, on a sound scientific basis. The function of any critic is to be the breaker of any old preconceptions. There aren't too many really bad institutions, but there are many indeed which, although outwardly committed to reformist views, actually behave like a young democracy - declarative and bureaucratic

## **Change that has not taken place**

Politically palatable concessions to issues of gender, ethnicity, aboriginal sensibility and the environment provide safe refuge for declarative minds and attribute to the rising hypocrisy of contemporary society. In an atmosphere of pretension, changes are often superficial: "Cosmetic change and accommodations are one. Metamorphosis is another"<sup>12</sup>.

The same goes for mere lip service toward professionalism. When it comes to hard practice, we still make cardinal mistakes. There are bad new museums. For instance, Paris lost its deserved historical momentum in museums as a result of a few newer "presidential" projects, which saw the profession fail to arrive at the conceptual cutting edge. Practice could not rectify the mistakes. Museum Orsay and the Museum of Arts and Crafts and Quai Branly Museum could not qualify for the best<sup>13</sup>, nor could the Museum of Music in Barcelona, or even the MACBA, to name just a few<sup>14</sup>.

## **Museums still fail to understand their mission**

The past is an invention of the Renaissance; before that time it had been lived and lived with. Museums could not have existed before the rationalized notion of the past, and once the past - or the need for it - was there, it

<sup>12</sup>Duncan Ferguson Cameron. Getting out of our Skin: Museums and New Identity. Muse. Special Issue. Summer/Fall, 1992. Canadian Museum Association. p.7

<sup>13</sup>Michel Kimmelman says that it "epitomizes French arrogance and architerctiral megalomania".

<sup>14</sup>Interestingly, a decent article in good French written on this theme a few years ago, of Paris losing its fame of the cultural capital of the world has not been accepted by the leading French newspapers. I understood it as hiding the bad news, - as a clear sign of being right in my claim.

was the question of time which saw the need for it to take institutional form. What was, at that time, discovered as a reaction to the Middle Ages; as inspiration for humanist revolution, became a tantalizing nightmare. "Neither the dreams nor the nightmares of revisiting the past are less intense for their seeming unlikelihood. Moreover, they offer clues to what it is of the past we truly need and can accept or should avoid or reject"<sup>15</sup>.

### **The frustrating demand of society**

A civilization that enters such great toil in order to preserve the past is experiencing a creative crisis and issues relating to identity. That explains why museums were founded in the eighteenth century. As a crisis is indeed apparent, museums and other institutions from the heritage field should facilitate the useful effects which arise from preservation of the past that assist survival. Yet, what they produce is ever more past. We still live in the quantitative age when museums also reflect the prevailing rule under which more is better: more museums, bigger collections; both in their ever increasing states will reach the limits of physical growth and force the profession, or the museum owners, to pose fundamental questions around finance or upon the true, desirable nature of the institution<sup>16</sup>.

Instead of helping people to overcome the problems of today and to prepare for the future, museums remained a public display of repositories of the past; a place

<sup>15</sup>Lowenthal, David. *Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Cambridge University Press, 1998. P.34

<sup>16</sup>Lord, Barry.; Dexter Gald Dexter.; Nicks, John. *The Cost of Collecting*. A Report Commissioned by the HMS Office of Arts and Libraries, 1989.

where one is not confronted with possible images of truth, but instead with deceiving visions from distant pasts which avoided any resemblance to actual problems. Yet, vested interests are recognizable, as the past is always newly tailored to suit them. These interests pertain to a group or a class, the true owners of the museum medium, and the museum is used to transform them into public values. The museum usually offers a solemn presentation of our ancestors; as being a temple to those past virtues that established it and, as such, implicitly suggests that they should reproduce and enjoy the same glory. Museums are influential because they are instructive and educational, and it is of the utmost importance as to what and whose values they promote. Owing to its representational choice of what to collect, the storage environments of museums are like treasures for a victorious, triumphal procession of the modern civilization. Who are its heroes?

**The world implies different heritage institutions.  
Crisis?**

If a reformed museum is there to help people live better so that they can at least understand the world around them, this would imply an evaluation of reality, past and present. Therefore, different museums and the different professions behind them, in fact, require all the necessary accessories needed to build professionalism, critique being an inevitable part of it. We have lived in the age of museums: museums were part of the project ideal of putting the memory of the world into asystematized form, and thus, it was made reliable because it was built upon scientific research and physical evidence. Therefore it became an

undeniable document of scientific assertion. It was an unconsciously built body of evidence, representing the scientific worldview, and to which there were no objections or doubts - only further perfections made by the number of collected items and the quality of their evidence.

A shift in values: the general approach

Object	Concept
Product	Process
Specific	General
Information	Communication
Possession	Disemination
Problems of science	Problems of community

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A shift in values: types of action

consecutive	proactive
informative	evaluative
didactic	provocative
educational	participatory

A shift in values: the theoretical approach

Museology	Mnemosophy, Heritology
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The new, changed world, with new problems by origin and by consequence, requires different solutions, needs different memory and demands new choices. The ownership of memory will be discussed more and more. It seems that the owners of the world are the owners of Change. Those who produce more change and manage to impose it upon the rest of us, have the power of managing its development. There are also those prevailing stakeholders who decide how public memory will be treated: what shall be stored and which messages will be derived from it. It is the true power of reigning supreme. The rulers were always owners of the past and so they continue to be today. Nowadays, the past is not any more distant, nor is it separated that much from today, so it requires different methods of transfer (media, manipulations of cultural industries, etc.) to ensure it is perceived as they would have it. Processes which were once automatic and spontaneous are now highly managed and manipulated, even in matters concerning the recently regarded unreachable domain of Nature and its manifestations in humans. Change has become synonymous with crisis as models and paradigms expire before they are installed. In that sense, even the criticism of practice and theory itself is just a running commentary on the constant flow of changes and new adjustments. We are getting better, but the challenges continue to grow. Some decades ago some practitioners were able to say: Crisis? We are

confronted with too much success<sup>17</sup>. Is that the case still, or was it the case at all? Crisis is a temporary state of an endangered system, leading either to new arrangement or disintegration; however we can only talk about this state as permanent tension. There has never been a quantitative, but rather, always a conceptual crisis of museums. They were always needed, but the on-going question has been whether they respond adequately to the needs that create them in the first place. In states of dramatic change, only a crisis can promise a usable future. Old concepts of museology, through which theory helped the basic practice of museums, have been successfully changed by a wider theory<sup>18</sup>. This one provided a philosophical basis for the vastly defined mission of public memory, with heritage as its core, and, consequently embodies the wider circle of institutions as the means of it. This synoptic and holistic approach has become the leading challenge, as was multidisciplinary in the early eighties. The new quality is here already.

### **Our important task dictates self-evaluation**

Criticism is bad if it ends in cynicism and it is good if it becomes a programme for reform and an affirmation of a plausible future. Quite often one would hear that we provide what our public requires. But the public is a specific group of pre-conditioned followers on one hand, and who are unable to understand the nature and

<sup>17</sup>John Sailer. Guest lecturer, Function and Future of Museums, Salzburg seminar. 1984.

<sup>18</sup>My proposals were Heritology and, latter, Mnemosophy. What matters however, is the content, not the term which always remain a convention.

the capacity of our profession, on the other. So how can the public articulate a sound request to us professionals? Well the public does send a message by rudely avoiding us, don't they? One can however develop the knowledge, experience and understanding towards the needs of our public, as well as those who pass by our open entrance doors without any urge to come in. These presumptions, and the understanding of the nature of our mission, should lead to projections which reflect the frustrating difference between what is offered and what should be offered. We are here for the much tougher challenges than our sympathetic public proposes.

### **What we deliver interprets the need inadequately**

If our users need a museum of sound, we still offer them a museum of musical instruments where an amazing quantity of original musical instruments silently bears witness to the history of instrument design<sup>19</sup>.

Mother nature, who we have betrayed to such a severe extent, inspires respect and awe, yet through our need to express devotion and to better understand it, our efforts more often resemble concentration camps for animals taken prisoner, or, even more paradoxically, we kill them, stuff them and then mount them in exhibits, in order to show how they looked when they were alive. Their plastic eyes are ideally neutral and staring vaguely with disinterest. As humankind, we

<sup>19</sup>Museo de la Musica in Barcelona, opened in 2007, is an example that building professionalism by critique still makes sense: when it was built, it was an old museum, although it was brand new.

appear near the point of committing suicide through the destruction of the Planet, and yet, we still seem to treat animals as if they do not share the same rights as us. The term for stuffing them in French is "naturalisation", a linguistic coincidence cynically expressing our paradoxical behaviour. In brief, though we do not lack technological alternatives for representation, we still kill animals for superficial purposes and taxidermists flourish like never before. Any natural history museum that understands its role may only be a bastion of citizens' action against this unbelievable, unprecedented assault on the basic conditions of survival. How about a demonstration in such a museum as to why and how are we approaching the point of no return with our pollution of the Planet? That this is the point after which there is no possibility of any regulation, remedy or salvation, when we put all forms of life at risk, including our own future descendants.

If there is a need for a museum that would cultivate the taste for aesthetic expression, and enjoyment of the arts, we would give our users prestigious palaces of whitewashed walls with the material substance of art encoded in the artefacts which, for the most part, they do not understand, nor would they have any clues to understanding. If we understand the role of museums as such, as one leading to an increased presence and appreciation of the arts, and as one including art within living environments - in the very life of the population; one sees how short we fall in ultimately fulfilling our mission. Taking art away from homes and artists' studios to be "hung" and placed upon pedestals in specialized places, is indeed, a delicate endeavour. It

requires a lot of skill and good reasoning in order to make it justified.

When we need a museum of local identity, a place where we can recognize ourselves and build self-assurance, we are usually presented historical accounts of aristocrats, rich folks and prestigious rulers.

Our simple need for understanding our technique and our technology is all too often interpreted through testimonials of the triumph of technology over humans and nature. Little evidence is offered that all we ever do is to imitate or get inspired by that very nature, and still less is said about the correct, sustainable uses of technology. This substitution of nature for demand, paradoxical but true, exists in the very core of the profession. Throughout the modern times in which we created museums, we have had a documented collective effort towards establishing a theory that could serve us in better fulfilling our mission. What we have succeeded in gaining, aside for the last two decades of change, was body of knowledge on the changing managerial and technical skills and technological circumstances of our trade. Relatively little was said, explained and appropriated in order to build up a convincing profession with all that would pertain to it.

Heritage is in the centre of the museum job and is the central concept in a growing domain. It is a subject well studied, but it needs further elaboration and consent. It is a limitless resource, and it is about power. It can divide or connect, unite or separate, be

constructive or manipulate, it can be true or false and fabricated, and of course it is always intangible and delicate.

### **The nature of mediators**

As is its nature, the modern museum is also part of that big eye of our alter-ego through which we observe ourselves incessantly, depriving our act of true participation in anything. We all live like we are in a film and act like we've been in one. Unlike our predecessors, we are not truly in charge of our experiences. Instead of being a place where some of this substantial relationship is re-created so as to be used outside the museum, a modern i.e. traditional museum remains one of the institutions where life is "played" out for us. Contemporary people associate little; their life is flooded by substitutes for any real experience. They do not associate with art and artists, let alone produce art, but go to art galleries to "enjoy" it. They do not play instruments and sing together but go to the concert halls. They do not cherish human relationships and emotional connections but read magazines, look at the television and go to the movies to see how others do it. Life, as true experience, becomes something belonging to others, and, in the case of museums, for those passed long ago. As we seem to be turning into the virtual world of shadows, museums offer us one additional virtuality - that of the past.

In the foreseeable future, if criticism paves the way, we shall think of museums as places of true experience, not in the sense of witnessing genuine objects, but as being public places of encounter and living together. Outside the parody of shopping malls, other

endeavours seem more like utopian projects, and they may well be, but in readiness for the future troubles that await us, we could at least work towards some solutions. Museums and other heritage institutions have the capacity to do so, but the conditions we require are not yet there.

Any mediator is like any institution: part of an organized effort that makes possible otherwise impossible performances by way of the system they help to serve. Yet, typical mediators are more akin to a transmission in physics or mechanics: a loss of energy and the power of original momentum. Any mediation or transmission is in permanent danger of turning, sooner or later, into a ramp or a toll house, and it usually does so. The defect may be called bureaucracy or institutionalism, or just mismanagement. It happens to others too, not to all of them (otherwise we would not know). By way of their excessive interest rates, bankers block the path to prosperity; the priests stand between the divine and the faithful charging for access; the politicians inhibit peace or societal contracts by creating problems that keep them in their position; big business stands in the way of social justice due to its insatiable demands; physicians and pharmacists stand in the way of appropriate usage of drugs and, finally, curators may block the way to wisdom with huge amounts of convoluted, badly selected or unnecessary knowledge, very much like equally inept educators. This is why bad museums, to use them as an example, in fact, expend heritage.

Conversely, uncharacteristic mediators act like filters and amplifiers who are able to discern and make quality choices, ensuring that transmission is

enhanced and enduring, rather than implying a loss. At their best, driven by a mission and creativity, public institutions are like that. Their attitude makes them part of the defensive system of their imparting concept; in the case of such museums, one can claim that they will not only help heritage be present and obvious, but keep it up and reinforce it: the ideal sustainability. This is why good museums, to stick to the example, in fact give back, by reinforcing and continuing what is entrusted to them.

### **Manner of lost professionalism**

Besides those general reasons, the true cause of this detachment is the scientific obsession of museums which keeps any creative, imaginative or artistic development of the museum, like their inclusion into real life and real time, at a safe distance. Without proper theory, museums will remain unable to find the necessary balance between science, at one extreme, and entertainment on the other. As it is basically a communicational institution, its basis may be science but its discourse and art are that of theatre or film, determined by its own specificity.

The caricature of an absent-minded professor lost in the scholastic questions of his specialist science fits all too well to the image of a traditional curator. This public imagery, oblivious to the pitfalls of professions, well depicts the self-exclusion of certain professions from the perils and risks of sharing a destiny with one's natural users.

In helping to revive a dead past we fail to see living things, people, or their values, which must be kept alive. Museums are for people, - to enable and support the quality of their existence. What cannot pass this



major criterion in museum theory and practice cannot be without criticism when confronted by efforts to change it for the better. It is therefore necessary to propose arguments and scope and measure progress with constant evaluation, so that the final result becomes a double gain: the survival of the profession and the efficiency of its service to its users.

### **Museums as a convention**

Museums exist for identity and because of it. The moment they become models, be it through their architecture or in their working process, they deceive their inherent nature. Any identity to which a museum can be a protective mechanism requires a specific mode of preservation and continuation. This sin becomes most obvious when museums are established in the world outside the Western European cultural circle. Museums formed upon the European model perform a role which may easily be adverse to the local culture, and as such, a museum institution can be a foreign, imposed body.

On which basic assumption are our museums founded? That man is good or evil? Does this question matter to them at all? If it doesn't, as may rightfully be the case, the intention to have them serve society is questionable, as is their communicational ambition. Without an ethical commitment, museums may well exist among people, but not for them. One famous director of an equally famous art museum publicly stated only twelve years ago: "As for the visitors, we don't mind their coming to our exhibitions". Much has fortunately changed since then, but for some, only in so far as avoiding statements of the kind in public.

Critique must be honest so that, even if truths are

painful, it does not become malicious and destructive. Its aim cannot be anything other than to provide a comprehensive inventory of weak points so that the profession can gain an improved awareness in order to revise its theory and practices. Purified in this way, the profession should be able to confront its imperfections and compete for its own place in the wider configuration of institutions. Any professional aligned with the museum cause will know or feel that we cannot give up if we desire that our mission, once it is conceived more or less clearly, is not our voluntary determination. We have to try hard to accomplish it and we can only be slowed down by our own deficiencies, or by the development of other mechanisms which do a better job.

There is a history of museum institutions, barely spanning more than two centuries, which has procured misconceptions that still thrive, at least in the most undeveloped circumstances. They are listed here, followed by a counter-statement which serves to address, albeit in brief, sometimes deeply rooted preconceptions and prejudices:

Museums are scientific institutions.

- The paradigm has changed. Museums are communicational institutions based on science. The job is different. When marketing was applied to it, it became obvious.

Traditional theory, Museology or Museum Studies is sufficient and satisfactory.

- Museology or Museography will, indeed, cover the methods, procedures and technologies that are required of the job. The grand theory, possibly a

science, reflects the level of General theory of heritage (Heritology<sup>20</sup>) or Mnemosophy<sup>21</sup>. It provides the explanation of a new profession.

Past in museums: - further back the better!

- The closer to contemporaneity the better: people need to understand THEIR world. How far museums will cede to the media and new soft industries of culture and heritage, remains a question. The public is conditioned by them, so the task of public heritage institutions may be to deconstruct lucrative mythology and demonstrate secure reality.

Heritage is reduced to cultural history, arts and science

- Heritage encompasses all things, indeed it comes from the intersecting and interweaving mixtures that are produced by life itself. This idea is now widely accepted, although it has still not been formalised as a common rule. Total heritage is the only form there is. The early, usable theory from some 30 years ago already acknowledged the importance of intangible heritage, but it was only in 2003 that UNESCO and ICOM included it in their definitions. In fact, any heritage is (also) intangible, but only some of it,

<sup>20</sup>Taught as a subject from the early 90s at University of Zagreb.

<sup>21</sup>This neologism marks a certain advancement to the concept of Heritology and is aimed, as the previous one, at making the central points more obvious already in the term itself.

evidently, is materialized.

Museums present and interpret according to the rules and methods of science

- Heritage institutions should communicate upon a basis of science but using the language and methods of life itself. Science is the initial value but not the goal. Even museums are means beyond their own existence.

There are some, quite separate professions that deal with heritage

- These are just occupations that, if united, have an opportunity to create a mega profession for the protection, care and communication of heritage.

The development sphere belongs to economics and politics

- Leaving development to politicians and businessmen has brought humanity to near gradual suicide: only social and humanist approaches based upon a scientific foundation can return us to quality and prepare us for sustainable development.

Culture is a money spender

- Culture is one of the most efficient driving forces of the economy. When it encompasses the value system, it is also the basis of the economy and of development.

**Finally, critique is a good reminder of the imperfect past**

The critical points, as partly explained in this introduction, will feature in any serious attempt at a critical analysis of museums. The list merits further elaboration and in its entirety, would be a rather long one indeed. Here we talk of “history” because most quality museums have no flaws, let alone those listed

below. Some of these now belong only to the ancient history of the profession. This list might serve as a reminder for new curators in times when challenges or dilemmas arise. And for those museums that allow room for development and wish to make improvements, I hope this list of “sins” will be welcome also. This criticism will not seem justified or necessary to a person close to the museum tradition. A traditional curator considers science an obligation and a privilege in their work and will, perhaps reluctantly, accept some of the objections. It is difficult to find any of these “sins” blatantly present in a museum. This little excursion in museum critique will help us to understand heritage institutions better. Some of the "sins" are indeed not so much the errors of practice at a particular time, but more indicative of succumbing to the temptations of certain circumstances. Current insiders may be aware of them, but those who follow may not be, and, therefore, this book may serve them well. Hopefully.

Museum history is made up of all the imperfections of human nature and the deficiencies derived from human endeavour. Much of what is now institutionalized as heritage was taken away from its original owners as spoils of war or unrestrained looting. The pillage of primordial cultures filled the popular readings with mythicized stories of archaeologists and anthropologists, like Mjoeberg, who stole and then smuggled aboriginal skeletons out of Australia.

"Our own museums (...) descend from both the post-Napoleonic impulse of 'omnium gatherum' resulting

in world expositions, and its more ludic counterpart of Barnumesque humbug and ballyhoo<sup>22</sup>. Luckily, times of alarming precautions have passed (though some new perils will appear): "The problems of museums, in fact, become some of the most urgent problems of our time<sup>23</sup>". Dillon Ripley was saying some decades ago that "In many states of the nation, museums are still as *infra dig*, as second rate citizens, as at any time in the past<sup>24</sup>". This has changed and would seem immaterial to mention, were it not for the new crisis of the liberal economy model which will bring some of these same problems back.

Museum history is burdened and shaped by institutions. Change is difficult and yet it is a daily imposed challenge: "The world of museums is much too cosy, affluent and unwilling to change<sup>25</sup>". Some relatively recent observation from a well reputed expert in marketing put it well: "It may well have been an unfortunate historical accident that these institutions have started and grown the way they have (...) close to, if not indeed, unmanageable, and beyond the public capacity to absorb without risk of

<sup>22</sup>Boone, James, A. *Verging on Extra-vagance*. Princeton University Press, 1999. p. 128

<sup>23</sup>Loehr, August. *Present Problems of Museums*. (Museum, UNESCO, Paris, vol. II, No. 3-4, p 37-39)

<sup>24</sup>Ripley, Dillon S. *Museums: Evolution or Revolution*. (The Museologist, No. 122, March 1972. p. 6)

<sup>25</sup>Bernadette Lynch, *International Museum Writer, Researcher and Consultant in a professional discussion in Leicester, 1997*.

<sup>26</sup>Dixon, Brian. *Marketing for Museums: Enhancing the Social value of the Museum Experience*. paper at Annual Meeting of MPR Committee of ICOM, Girona Espana, 1991., P.15

confusion, distortion and misinformation.<sup>26</sup>”

The museum future is grandiose. The Great Convergence<sup>27</sup> will compose a powerful public sector managed by an autonomous profession. This great development will not be easy and will have its negative tendencies as great novelties are always paid with a backward step. Which one will we choose? The more "sins" we leave in the past the better.

Why would an imperfect past matter? Because the past can return in curious ways. When a power system consistently poses the question: do we, indeed, have to finance museums? One may suppose that; after two odd centuries of benevolent attitudes towards them, the successful marriage of state and the non-profit sector has expired. Maybe the alliance can be renewed upon new terms, but, then, do museums offer arguments seeking that? Some do, - lavishly, others don't. Many don't. Now less in demand, the resounding calls of alarm require a response from a primed and enlightened profession, and that we do not have. So why would old problems re-appear? The general scarcity of resources may lower the performance level of museums and lead to the adverse selection of employees. The pressure of the new rich, powerful corporations and accompanying false elites may divert heritage institutions and heritage professionals from their noble aspirations and move the gravitational centre of the professional from social

<sup>27</sup>Syntagm is mine; it is the name of the process that describes merging particular domains of heritage into a shared professional field of public memory.

to elitist and mercantile. This sort of "orbital decay", which results in a gradual loss of elevation, is caused by a lack of understanding of their role, on the part of the professional, and results in inadequate responses to the challenges posed by their competitors (entertainment, culture industries, soft businesses, the heritage industry etc.) because of their unwillingness to seriously undertake the challenge of the profession. The Dream Industry is removing the arguments for curiosity and nostalgia from museums by creating invented worlds, which meet the most secret dreams and expectations of the public. These competitors impose difficult challenges and cannot be overcome at the grass-roots level. Nobody can fight to strengthen the position of the heritage mission better than heritage institutions and heritage professionals who utilise the power of excellence; by raising standards, developing obligatory training and building united arguments that confront feeble stakeholders, unconvinced allies and waiting adversaries.



## **2. Museum fatigue, boredom and lack of communication**

### **Fatigue or spleen**

The museum is the only institution that has assumed a term that denotes its failure to keep its users happy and enthused. The very term was coined in by Benjamin Gilman<sup>28</sup> in 1916. There is no equivalent term to describe "concert fatigue" or "theatre fatigue"; - we only know that a bad performance is, indeed, a fatiguing experience. And yet the term "museum fatigue" endures, as if by some implicit claim, that we have some right to anomalies in performance. It denotes a state of exhaustion and mental saturation. The former is a result of the discouragingly large permanent or temporary exhibitions offered by museums, and the latter; a result of great amounts of information and cognitive dissonance which eventuate in any unfamiliar environment. Museum fatigue, of course, is not merely due to the gigantic size of some museums; that happened initially because, succumbing to all lures of prestige, the process of their creation never fully maintained the users focus, or rather, was primarily governed by the

<sup>28</sup>Gareth, Davey. What is Museum Fatigue? / Visitor Studies Today. Vol. 8, issue 3, 2005.

underlying interests of science. The majority of users, in most traditional museums, are not able to establish contact between personal experience and the knowledge offered in the museum, nor would they be convinced that they are in need of it all. Confusion, dissatisfaction, even anger, can become logical consequences of a visit to such museums, and a second visit, or even the recommendation of one to somebody, becomes a highly improbable prospect.

If certain captions are boring, they can be made that way by content that is excessive, scientific or meticulousness: Charles chess figures of Charles the Great in one museum are all given captions. The lengthy individual captions for each, differ in only a single detail: the name of the figure. Other captions are too tiny, placed in inappropriate locations, or they simply do not refer to the object above them, which is a boring riddle to solve. An overregulated rhythm of objects and captions in large quantities, scattered upon walls, can be a fatiguing sight.

It seems that this unique problem has been thoroughly studied<sup>29</sup>. The latest definition states that museum fatigue is "a collection of phenomena that represent predictable decreases in visitor interest and selectivity (...) attributed to a combination of visitor factors (such as cognitive processing, physical fatigue and individual characteristics) factors in the environment (such as exhibit architecture and the museum setting)

<sup>29</sup>Gareth, Davey. What is Museum Fatigue? / Visitor Studies Today. Vol. 8, issue 3, 2005; the bibliography is particularly well chosen and proves that a variety of people from the fields of psychology to sociology, have studied the problem.

and interaction between them<sup>30</sup>". To see a museum guard asleep, strangely bent in a chair, is far from an attention encouraging sight<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, a sister-guard in the Museum of Ursulines in Quebec, absorbed in the act of filling in a cross-word, was a paradoxical sign of life, a dear picture that ennobles the human experience.

Though it has been criticized, the bizarre atmosphere of museums that became their popular image is fine in literature<sup>32</sup>, yet problematic for visiting. Indeed, in these instances they are void of life and a disappointing sign of abandonment. Museum fatigue, in fact, often turns into "museum spleen". What the French call "spleen" describes a state of mind that is much more complex than a low spirit, ill humour or melancholy, as it might be translated in English. It is a sort of induced deep sorrow, anguish, boredom, gloom, sullenness; a doleful feeling, a sort of indefinable uneasiness... Some visitors take any opportunity to slip away or, if possible, take a nap even though the bench is made of artificial stone.

Some visitors experience fatigue in the form of an aching back or tired eyes and a weary mind, others feel it without knowing it, and many simply avoid places that are renowned for it. Traditional museum curators accept it as a part of their natural environment and the

<sup>30</sup>Gareth, Davey. What is Museum Fatigue? / Visitor Studies Today. Vol. 8, issue 3, 2005.

<sup>31</sup>In an important national museum in Paris, a few years ago, a drunk guard insisted on guiding me through exhibits; an experience that was as strange as it was annoying.

<sup>32</sup>Sartre, Jean Paul. Mučnina. Matica Hrvatska, Zagreb, 1983. P.92-94

Museums are the only institutions  
with their own, official, - disease



culturally conditioned public can sometimes refuse museums that don't reflect this overtly sensitive flare for the past. There is a morbid kind of style to them. Many bright minds have been frustrated by museums. In one of his texts P. Valery complains that a museum he visited "contains less testimonies than some fictive arrangement; it deceives at the same time as it fatigues". "When I visited Trocadero, everything there was so repulsive to me. The fair of old junk. Unpleasant odour. I was the only visitor. I wanted to leave....<sup>33</sup>" "Museums are supposed to be places of enjoyment, although, judging by most of them you would not know it<sup>34</sup>". "A lot of people would never

<sup>33</sup>Malraux, Andre. *La Tête d'Obsidienne*, 1974, p.17; Malraux stayed and found strong reasons to do so, but his sensibility and capacity made him do so. What about the average visitor? Things changed, of course, but problems transpired to a different level.

<sup>34</sup>Strong, Roy. *Museums: new horizons for the seventies*. *Museums Journal*, vol70., No.3, Dec 1970. p 104

think of putting their foot through a museum door. They've been to enough museums to know that they are dull and stuffy<sup>35</sup>". This early criticism is meritorious for the huge advance museums have made. But, it should not be forgotten because, even in the most developed countries, with splendid museum practice, we still have about half of the population that has never set foot in a museum. Yet, they all pay for them, one way or another.

When, out of logical necessity, a conventional museum wants to communicate, it cannot avoid the essential dreariness of doing so through patronizing educational methods like the obligatory reading of books in a dull, tautological manner. Successful museums will leave visitors with something of an integral impression close to the stimulation one gets from viewing a work of art or after seeing a theatre piece. Again, professionalism is the ability to strike the measure between mere education and lavish entertainment, for museums are none of the two.

### **Lack of common appeal, or museums without chairs**

"I do not think we are in any real doubt that there are two things a museum is for: conservation and education. Having agreed on that, we have to admit that the two functions are so fundamentally different that they continually cause disunity in our ranks"<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>35</sup>Whitman, John. More than Buttons, Buzzers and Bells. (Museum News, Washington, Sept/Oct, 1978., p. 49

<sup>36</sup>Finlay, Ian. The next ten years. Museums Journal, London, vol.70, No.3. dec. 1970. pp 100-102

Even though this statement was made long ago, it continues to resonate in professional reality. In the meantime we moved on to communication, leaving education to schools. We also moved away from conservation as a mission, towards conservation as a tool, which assists the quality of life of our communities. So how far have we advanced? Some museums have advanced an amazing distance, and excelled brilliantly in their journey.

A lack of professional training makes it rather impossible for most curators (trained specialists in their proper academic domain) to be aware of the consequences and implications of their exhibitions. Designers, if they are good, can help, but if they are bad, they can make the problem even worse. As ever, common sense helps a lot, but we usually lose that during our long periods of schooling. It is almost proverbial how boring curators can get if they are given an opportunity to lead you around their museum. Of course, for non-goers, who may, at least as tourists, venture into such places, they find the experience far from rewarding. Many people, inside and outside the profession, either know or feel that an attractive museum is not necessarily a feat of science or professionalism but, paradoxically, a product of their own affirmation. So what helps? Careful doses of information, comfort, atmosphere, aesthetics, coherence of space and contents, - in brief, offers based upon formative evaluations, whether they're real or virtual, they are founded so as to generate the best possible benefit for users. In such museums, everything that is there imperceptibly functions to meet the pre-set goal of ensuring visitor satisfaction;

that they are fed and watered, even if the restaurant is expensive, that the light is not too dim, that the ramps and elevators are easy to locate, that the toilet is accessible and not crowded, that texts are in the appropriate sized font, language and length, that comfortable seats are available where they are needed...Kenneth Hudson used to say that museums can be divided into two basic types: the ones with chairs and those without them. With this he refers to a situation any passionate museum visitor will have experienced: one sees a splendid, extraordinary object that would require a further moment's contemplation and there, all of sudden, you see a chair or a stool available. This simple message has the capacity to psychologically colour your entire visit: You are in a friendly place. Hard seats are the common method employed by museum designers to join the austere notion of comfort for visitors. Cold concrete benches are the opposite of comfort, and promote fatigue.

A dozen or so years ago, Kenneth Hudson asked a curator in a German museum: Can I get a cup of coffee in your museum? The answer was bizarre: Well, we wanted to have that option, but the architect wouldn't allow it...." It was another clear instance which demonstrated that "visitor friendly" is not merely a demagogic slogan, but a way to behave in institutional daily practice. The other fact, by the way, is that of curatorial acceptance and subordination to the decisions of the architect, - a clear demonstration of inferiority due to a lack of professional status.

To compete with the vitality of other media, museums must be more direct and offer multiple connections to the present and with living people. Exhibitions and

openings are not enough. Things have changed, so no professional today will say that art exhibitions are put on for the artists and that the public is welcome<sup>37</sup>, but many will hold events for an initiated "inner circle", rather than for the mob. Well, that signals that "the mob", when they come, will be bored. This produced a widespread popular conviction that curators, like university professors, are boredom-happy. They seem to prefer to give their audience what it does not need under a tacit agreement that is inexistent, but that most would not care or dare to oppose. It must be agreed that there's nothing very exciting in the hushed, empty spaces of museums, if they remain as such. Introducing a blend of wit and humour into the discourse will counteract boredom. A church that is relying solely upon devout discipline and certain masochism of its believers can, to an extent, ignore sore feet and aching backs, but museums cannot.

<sup>37</sup>A claim made 25 years ago at an official conference by an important museum director and, at the time, also a director of the Documenta event.



### **3. Fragmentation of reality and de-contextualisation**

#### **De-contextualisation and the scientific approach**

Bazin thought that museums in the 1960s already subdued to the general nostalgia and so they installed the period rooms<sup>38</sup>. One would say that something else was certain: a growing awareness that the highly intellectual language of de-contextualized objects was simply boring and inaccessible. Curiously, Bazin also claims that the museum has penetrated into private life because period interiors were en vogue. Back in the 1960s and 1970s museums were not so influential and this communicational breakthrough would not have required much more than adjusting to the needs and nature of the time, as opposed to serving to facilitate individual insight.

"Anthropological knowledge is realized at the temporal distance and out of context"<sup>39</sup>. So an entire body of knowledge about others and otherness may, in fact, be inauthentic and arbitrary. Scientific analytical methods and classification, and resulting specialisations, are reasons for this specific museum

<sup>38</sup>Bazin, Germain. *The Museum Age*. New York, Universe Books, 1967. p.7

<sup>39</sup>Fabietti, Ugo; Malighetti, Roberto; Matera, Vincenzo. *Od lokalnog do globalnog*. Clio, Beograd, 2002. P.182

defect. In the tradition of museums the object is deprived of its context. Context is either lost, buried in curatorial research material, or in his/her expertise, which is conveyed only through professional literature. We often see different, exotic objects, but rarely question how they came about in the first place. Take, for example, a collection of objects from 18th and 19th century India. Is it really possible to understand them without explaining the circumstances of the East-India Company which, at the time, ruled 250 million people, had the biggest paid army in the world, possessed forty-three personal war ships and even had its own bishops?

In the 15th Century a knight of the Order of Santiago, Don Garcia Osorio, was buried in the church of Toledo along with his Donna Maria de Perea wearing a simple dress and holding rosary beads. His chain mail and armour were placed at his feet, along with a mourning figure. The sculptural parts of the two effigies are dismembered and now arranged as a work of art in the Victoria and Albert museum in London<sup>40</sup>.



Both of them had a tomb and the bodies beneath and have probably been painted. The original context is gone, but common sense poses many ethical and conceptual dilemmas. The story of their post-mortem adventure (by which sculpted parts of their effigies ended up in a foreign country and culture), 1700 km north of the place where it was intended to remain for eternity), might be more interesting than the objects themselves. Well the church has been demolished and "displaced mostly, far away from their original destination, without context, - have we repeated enough, how can they count with immediate comprehension?"<sup>41</sup>

The above example is perhaps not the best of them, but we can understand very little without providing context. From amongst hundreds of thousands of objects onboard a ship, one can gain very little from a single navigational instrument that has been removed from its original context. In this instance, the object is unable to convey any usable message beyond itself. We know that ships operate as a distinct and organized whole, both functionally and spatially, so the extraction of this one single object becomes even more lost. Would anyone choose to represent a marine coat with a single gilded button?

There are myriads of ceremonial objects that nobody is praying to any more. "They have fallen to the rank of admirable objects, extinguished suns..."<sup>42</sup>, because

<sup>40</sup>The photo reproduced has been taken from: <http://professor-moriarty.com/info/section/church-monument-art/16th-century-church-monuments-effigy-donna-maria-perea-toledo-spain>

<sup>41</sup>Galard, Jean. *Visiterurs du Louvre: un florilege*. Paris, Editions de la Reunion des Musees Nationaux, 1993, p.185

<sup>42</sup>Jean-Louis Forain in: Galard, Jean. *Visiterurs du Louvre: un florilege*. Paris,

they are no longer where they belong, where they are venerated. This has changed somewhat, but not everywhere: "It is only relatively recently that any concerted effort has been made to tackle social and cultural issues in displays, to locate objects in their social context"<sup>43</sup>. The call for museum involvement in community life will remain futile if museums continue to exist in their own scientific dimension, in the realm of de-contextualized information.

Without the "soup" of myths, beliefs, ambitions, needs, aspirations, historical events and destinies, in which these defunct objects would usually be immersed, they make little sense. It is this "soup" that provides meaningful, productive order and one from which we derive generative effects: morals, wisdom, revelation, an ennobled mind...Emphatically said, without fluid context, these objects are kept "alive" by cultural conditioning and claims that arranged depositories of objects provide a natural way of understanding our environment in its multiple dimensions. Paul Valery, a great admirer of insights into the past wrote: "I firmly believe that neither Egypt, nor China, nor Greece, which were wise and refined, did not know this system of juxtaposing productions which devour one another"<sup>44</sup>. "It was this uprooting, transplantation and lack of coherence that Valery blames museums for"<sup>45</sup>. In fact, Valery was

<sup>43</sup>McLean, Fiona. *Marketing the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1997. P.44

<sup>44</sup>Galard, Jean. *Visiterurs du Louvre: un florilege*. Paris, Editions de la Reunion des Musees Nationaux, 1993, p.78-79

<sup>45</sup>M. Stettler, ICOM General Conference 1968.

exuberant in his critique of the "mess" museums present with a mixture of all sorts of objects. Though justified at the time for the sensitive poet he was, Valery's sentiments now ignite the possibilities of the museum's own communicational discourse.

Museums, when viewed with little sense of self irony, can be compared to the "Collegium Logicum" from "Faust" in which Mephistopheles tells to the student:

“He who would study organic existence,  
First drives out the soul with rigid persistence;  
Then the parts in his hand he may hold and class,  
But the spiritual link is lost, alas!”<sup>46</sup>

Science must speak of facts and it does so specially when trying to be convincing. But facts are the result of ruthless isolation, biased choices and the unpredictable interactions of numerous factors. Facts appear obvious because context and circumstance are cleared away to make way for logical strings of causality and/or narratives which give them credibility. Living in the age of synthesis may bring necessary change, because what analysis did to enable research must be reassembled to make sense again: communication cannot be built upon analysis only because synthesis is the language of life.

Therefore, in conventional heritage institutions an understanding of the objects' meanings is rendered difficult, or even impossible. One author says that in

<sup>46</sup><http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm#IV>

the Louvre "there is nothing either natural or necessary". An interesting point, because the Louvre and other huge museums enrage oversensitive thinkers<sup>47</sup>.

To cultivate a certain hope for integrity through a "montage of attractions"<sup>48</sup>, indeed a new communicational language of heritage, would imply some of the feeling and knowledge of the true meanings of the objects. Museums have always tried to compensate for that shortage with guided tours, secondary material (texts, pictures, diagrams, photographs, models, facsimiles, replicas) or indeed, as is the case more and more, by the help of actors, ambitious scenography, reconstructions, installations, audio-visual presentations, information points and so on. The "theatre" approach, enriched with new media, presupposes an understanding of the media itself, dramaturgy and a new collaborations with various external experts (artists, designers, programmers, drama experts, light engineers, etc.), all knowledge and experience very few curators are even familiar with. Through the concept of the museum as a communication medium, synthesis instead of analysis becomes a feature of the museum's working process.

Notwithstanding, objects in museums are still so often deprived of their true meaning and lack any logical context. Even museums as institutions are frequently

<sup>47</sup>McCellan, Andrew. *Inventing the Louvre*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>48</sup>the term is borrowed from Sergei Eisenstein, famous Russian film director, who wrote a book by the same title.

just accumulations of objects which have no logical relation with their environment, having been obtained either as a consequence of some scientific ambition, historic circumstance or just as mere evidence of prestige and past conquests. In the past decade or two, context has rightfully become the name of inaptitude and deficiency, but it is also the objective to attain. This objective has caused unprecedented use of secondary material and of audio-visual media in conveying museum messages<sup>49</sup>.

This sin may be the permanent temptation to excommunicate things from their proper environment, i.e. other than their own. Any heritage is best preserved in situ. But, that is not a new idea, one might say. Well nothing is, but there is more to that than logic. One good day, we shall think hard of how to give back what we have taken, not only Indian or Aboriginal skeletons but literally, even things we have excised from their semiotic, human and social context.

### **Museums respond, but their way**

In brief, if our users are in need of a museum of sound (which would be all too understandable, as it is music that matters), we offer them a museum of musical instruments in which an amazing array of original musical instruments silently witness the history of instrument design and their classification. Not music. Happily enough, more and more musical instrument

<sup>49</sup>Ever since McLuhan, it has become a matter of ignorance or simple backwardness to laugh out the term "messages" in heritage profession. Indeed, it is not telegraphic messages that we are about. The very irony of those critics or the cravats they wear are messages, whether they choose to ignore or ridicule that fact.

museums are becoming museums of music and they say so in their titles, as well as demonstrate it in their galleries.

If there is a need for a museum that would cultivate the taste for aesthetic expression, or simply provide visual literacy for the rising frustrated public, we give them marble palaces of whitewashed walls with thousands of paintings and sculptures as a material substance of art coded in the artefacts. Not all the magic is there: the artist, the smells of materials, the contact, the explanation, the sounds, the dialogue.... Even now, after a few decades of professional reflection and good practices, good art museums that really care for the user, like an artist would care for a connoisseur in the studio, are rare<sup>50</sup>.

### **Oceans of knowledge**

The urgent, incessant need to understand the logic and capacity of technology thus becomes, in our museums, a review of its triumphs over humans and nature with (still) too little recognition that science can be used to good or bad ends; that development occurs according to the laws of profit and to everybody's expense. Museums support this fascination which regards technology as an aim in itself and an achievement by way of its sophistication. However, what we increasingly have in our museums is a discourse demonstrating that knowledge alone is not quality, but only a means towards it, that technology is only a tool for whatever we as mankind decide to do with it, and not necessarily, as has been previously mentioned, a measure of triumph over humans and nature.

<sup>50</sup>Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Netherlands



**A "Knowledge society" is not a goal to achieve.  
We are already drowning  
in an ocean of knowledge:  
we ARE the Knowledge society.  
That is part of the problem.  
“More knowledge” is an obsolete priority.  
Unlike more valuable knowledge,  
or a new understanding of the old.**

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To have a philosophical foundation upon which the professional mission may exist for its own purposes, the profession prescribes itself a constant cure among an increasing quantity of facts in a manner of guises. Thus, at a time when we are in need of more wisdom, inside and outside of our museums, we are instead given more knowledge. Oceans of it.

## 4. Elitism

It would be unnecessary to mention the elitism of ancient museums, as they have become a mere distant reminder of former societies, places of science and arts with an issuing nature that legitimizes them. Public institutions have evolved, though we are rightfully dissatisfied. "The museum represents essentially a culture of elites, and exerts no influence on the culture of the masses"<sup>51</sup>. Having been said a long time ago, this sentiment leaves us with a new definition of elites and a new attitude toward the masses. Both have decreased in quality; while that rather academic lament has, in the meantime, become a serious social and professional defect.

### **Whose culture?**

"La culture des autres"<sup>52</sup>. A museum is, more often than not, especially in Europe, a public, democratic institution financed from taxes, which implies that it should serve the interests of the population. However, as so often happens in a political system, the assumed roles are administered by state institutions and bodies

<sup>51</sup>Argan, Giulio Carlo. *Circulating and Educational Exhibitions in Italian Museums* (Museum, UNESCO, Paris, 1950, vol III, No.2, p.289

<sup>52</sup>The Others' Culture. It is the title of the book of H.Varine with a concise social critique of museums, the best and only of its kind so far.

which, in turn, are heavily dependent, or even controlled by, different power groups. Many museums are therefore simply expressing the value systems of those groups.

Historically, they have inherited a loyalty to the collectors, benefactors, boards of trustees, and Maecenas, and that indebtedness is embedded in their collections, their buildings and their annals. "Museums are created by the elite and for the elite"<sup>53</sup>, if that is true, it's a rather frightening statement. One option is to leave it at that, alternatively, one could try and turn everything elitist, or yet another is to adjust it to the needs, according to the museum's mission.

The respect of the general public stems from an educationally conditioned identification, however people are often left feeling at a loss about both the venues and their content. The strong challenge imposed by sophisticated content does not align with their education or time constraints and leaves potential users embarrassed and concluding that the entire enterprise was conceived to cater for others who are more responsive to the challenge, and, seemingly, for those who have more time to learn and enjoy. "It is really absurd that our opening hours are still in keeping with those of the nineteenth century, when there existed a large leisured class who could frequent museums and galleries during the day"<sup>54</sup>. This was said a relatively long time ago, but how many museums have really changed their opening hours since then? We did see quite a few museums change;

<sup>53</sup>McLean, Fiona. *Marketing the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1997. P.24

<sup>54</sup>Strong, Roy. Museums: new horizons for the seventies. *Museums Journal*, vol70., No.3, Dec 1970. p.103

to profit from the late hours, provide free Sundays and even nights in the museum<sup>55</sup>, but on the whole, statistics would show that the heritage sector still does not assume its true public role. Curatorship is still not a profession, nor is the curator's counterpart in other heritage occupations, and so their elitism is confined to the four "elites" that generate curatorial obedience and self-censorship:

1. The "elitism" of the media that position museums and heritage institutions as decorative additions to their programmes (in most countries they serve to fill up the gaps for late night viewing, however superficially and conservatively, it derives from sheer ignorance.

2. The "elitism" of politicians who deem museums and like institutions to be places for scoring prestige points and cashing in on the popularity and sensationalism of museums particularly, and in more recent times, libraries (both often "-cum" cultural centres)...<sup>56</sup>.

3. The "elitism" of corporations which take heritage institutions as public opinion makers. Through product sponsorship, their influence and involvement is dependent on visitor numbers; very seldom would they commit to financing something that is happening behind the scenes. Boards of prestigious institutions

<sup>55</sup>This is one of the misunderstandings of museums' role generated by the business marketing experts, lacking the deep understanding of culture and its role in society.

<sup>56</sup>The proverbial example of that, though sometimes (Grand Louvre, BN, CGP) with extraordinary consequences, is France with its presidential obsession with leaving grand cultural institutions behind, - all for the national glory. Curious and rather egotist manner is that of American presidents who manage to build huge institutions devoted to their memory.

are the exception here, especially those in the States, where the prestigious membership has a six figure price tag.

These "elites" are employing an increasingly democratic rhetoric, but would shun any socially and politically active institutional policy. They do this however, in a subtle and delicate way. Elitism is an open or implicit attitude that others have either no right or capacity (or both) to enjoy ones' status (be it education, wealth, or any other position affording opportunity or advantage). The institutional world of heritage is functioning according to a tacit, unwritten contract with those who provide the money and own the system. In the States, private museums have the status of charitable organisations, representing the reality of the sector. They are only partly supported by public money. Curiously enough, in most other countries where institutions are financed by public money, the sector behaves in rather the same manner. It actually means that their elitism is their inborn vice. The predominant reason for this is lack of professionalism, described vaguely in this intentionally provocative "list" of sins. Wherever professionalism has been fostered, whether it is through applicable or incited professional training, or advanced efforts towards an evolved self-building occupation, we do see encouraging practices that put museums and other heritage institutions within the developmental paradigm.

## Why is it that museum autonomy stays a theory?

Because museums strive ...

- to assure support from politicians and stakeholders
- to please the corporative sector
- to assure beneficial budgets and subventions
- to stick to the themes and interpretations that keep the public mind dormant and apologetic
- to assume legitimacy for *a posteriori*, scribe- attitude



**... or is it just a lack of professionalism?**

The author, Tony Bennett, created the original caricature with a different intention for The Christian Science Monitor

### **A past of rich and noble others**

The obliging past, and the sense of importance it derives, has been an invention (first) of the rich and (then) the educated; having come together by way of their own interests, or having been called upon. The owners of this stored past turned it from treasuries into museums, making it a sort of cherished bank of proofs which testified to their credibility and their rights. Treasuries of valuables shifted from gold to a focus on providing proof and reminders of legitimacy and power. No longer being stored in hidden locations within the castle, collections of valuables descended to open spaces and became public, thus being protected by the governing system and their governing values. As history became an obvious asset, sometimes even through the prolonged continuation of wars, it was only natural that the changing and expanding power structures changed

and took ownership of the public memory institutions. This is why in museums the public sees the lives of rulers, nobles and the rich, and naturally, it appears that lives of peasants, citizens, merchants or craftsmen are either less important or unknown. It was intended that way. Many museums did remain treasuries, however garrulous or seemingly relaxed and sympathetic many of them became.

Museums do declare themselves eager to serve the community and yet, they collect, interpret and communicate artefacts belonging to the aristocracy "of blood," or of money. Instead of finding magnificence in the simple, useful public memory, they offer the "gloriosae memoriae" of the other. They fall prey to the "upward socio-economic bias"<sup>57</sup>. Our Confucian museums declare to care for everyone, but actually they only care for the powerful, wealthy and educated. They support the claims of the powerful, to the wealthy they give power and they provide the educated with ever more knowledge. So, what about the underdog - those from further down the social scale, or those who are hardly on it at all? Some curators used to call it the "vulgarisation" of museums, and, indeed, there were some museums that undertook this alternative approach in a very clumsy way.

The old Williamsburg open-air museum has changed little over a number of decades as "it commemorates the planter elite....timeless values of Americanism",

<sup>57</sup>Dixon, Brian. marketing for Museums: Enhancing the Social Value of the Museum Experience. conference paper. Annual Meeting of MPR International Committee of ICOM, Girona, Spain. 1991. p.20

as one author says, still reflecting a time when half the population were black slaves. The fascination with greatness and importance is often mere kitsch on which entire industries live. But was it not subtly rendered legitimate by museums themselves? It seems the time has come where people do not entirely ignore the stories of others, as has occurred in conventional museums, but want their proper museums to provide a means for their own truth, or maybe, as a cynic would suggest, for their own lie.



Passing on the cherished collective memory of our King Charles the Decent, but what was the probable reality, the one that history rarely cedes and museums hardly ever show?

The impossible puzzle that museums represent is full of unexpected divisions and contradictory influences. Museums, as with any other institution, will demonstrate the values of their owners. But, who are they? The "Public institution" is basically saying that it





By courtesy of the author, Ivica Kiš

has a public purpose and, possibly, public financing. It is "overseen by such diverse ministries as education, tourism, defence, environment, national heritage, culture and leisure"<sup>58</sup> and that does not say a thing about the parties in power, the role of state or local administration, or the way these institutions are governed or managed.

If there is a need to make people understand their local history and acquire a sense of identity, the museum profession presents them with a history of the rich and noble. What about the others? Whose culture are we paying them to represent? Museums tell us big stories about big things, whereas our lives are all small stories about small things. Will our museums finally say that we, modest as we are, as we stand in front of these glass cases are probably nobler? Will they finally assert that a noble person should include anyone deserving an

<sup>58</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica

epithet by his/her human qualities, disregarding politically established genealogy or financial status?

### **Turning excellence into a democratic value**

Heritage institutions rarely target the real needs of their audiences and easily slip into what seems, and what is claimed to be, more important in the public mindset, as determined by the media. We usually like what we deem accessible and worth our effort, or rather, something we can easily identify with. Yet people seem to fall prey to lofty aspirations as these dreams are more attractive by definition. A discourse that dealt exclusively with the seemingly unimportant, unconfirmed and unorthodox subject matter outside the mainstream would be failing traditional expectations as well as the stakeholders. It would, in turn, make those institutions seemingly unconvincing. Therefore, most of them opt for an elitist approach, preferring the remarkable, peculiar and particular, and leaving out both the themes and audiences that could find the opposite more instructive and useful.

There is nothing wrong with the existence of elitist collections and excellence museums. They can be elitist through their high scientific or aesthetic aspirations, but still sensitive to all interests and interest levels, - and in doing so, they are elitists in the best sense of the word. Particular interests which are elitist in character can create museums or heritage institutions and provide support for them too, both financially and through visitor attendance. Again, there is nothing wrong with that. It is an

unsympathetic option to many, but still an option which may serve a noble cause<sup>59</sup>. Elitism in spirit and criteria is not a sin. Some museums are bound to remain as such, though any museum can make gestures towards its potential users by explaining its stance. Likewise, although they are democratic by definition, museums should not be tapered to neophytes and ignorance by temptations toward populism or consumerism. Within the diapason of possibilities some heritage institutions, or parts of them, will be places of noble contemplation while the others will serve life needs directly in a relaxed and cosy manner.

So, a museum entirely devoted to masterpieces may appear as a sort of elitism, but much would depend upon the way curators interpret them, the way they communicate them and their choice of audience. There is no value, however sophisticated, that cannot be communicated to children, the handicapped or the uneducated. In fact, aren't they likely to profit the most from those masterpieces? It is hardly contradictory to the needs or the comfort of the cultured and knowledgeable. Museums today arrange an incredible array of services (study exhibitions, open storage facilities, loan services...). Therefore, what is elitist can be turned into democratic and

<sup>59</sup>Museum Nissim Cammondo in Paris is a wonderful example of a fortune turned public through the respectable attempt of a father to commemorate his son. The museum conveys richness in its splendor and certainly does not question how it came about, or elaborate on the social and political circumstances from which it was derived.

accessible. Again, without public money and social responsibility this unique capacity of public memory will become a privilege that is only made possible by the noble charity of the rich. When the rich give, they usually take something in return. In this case, they have but one "self-evident", "unimposing" implicit demand and that is to accept and worship their values. Citizens do not need to be grateful to anybody for what belongs to them in terms of material value of humanist ethics. Anonymous bequests and donations still reflect those who actually trade when "giving".

Public heritage institutions should not compromise their position by owing anything to anybody except to the changing generations of citizens they serve. That is democratic contribution.

### **Curatorial elitism**

The history of Curatorship is a long story of success, full of brilliant scientific careers and great authority. Rightly so. As the character of museums changed to that of heritage institutions, science remained the core value but also the platform upon which to build the mission in society. Research became a pedestal for the colourful and moving sculpture of communication. I remember one of the stars of the museum world referring publicly to the character of museums: "The best view still comes from the top of the ivory tower"<sup>60</sup>. This sentiment cannot be heard publically any more, but it is still there, though with decreasing

<sup>60</sup>Philip de Montebello, director of Metropolitan Museum, N.Y., Salzburg seminar, 1989.

legitimacy. There is one additional aspect of elitist knowledge: keeping it confined to the curatorial staff and not trying to disseminate it in a usable and practical manner to the lower staff, including guards, at least in some general instances. Any museum is part of a single working process and has to be instilled by the same spirit, same philosophy and the consequences of the same mission statement. Surely, this means that it will have different areas of intensity and quality at different points of the process, but the target audience, the type of institution and the kind of activity has to be the same across the board. If a museum wishes to be a popular, crowded place, everybody in that museum should be familiar with the arguments and shape the consequences.

In this respect, today's museums are more advanced places than concert halls and their counterparts in the performing arts. Although silent museums still prevail, the concerts of today are held in complete silence, owing to the mythisation of the conductor and the atmosphere. Not long ago in the 18th century, elegant conversation was a natural part of the atmosphere of a concert, - just as the participatory theatre is an avant-garde re-invention of the Shakespeare's reality. This is not an implied call for the "de-sacralisation" of the temples of culture, nor is it a call to introduce the atmosphere of a bustling marketplace. Rather, might we make the general suggestion that museums, taken as part of life, would become less silent but more useful.

## Two possible attitudes of curators towards the profession

- To contribute to the professionalisation of their occupation by building partnerships in developmental strategies with their society and their communities
- To obstruct this process through reluctance, reticence and specialist highbrow refusal, seeing their retirement as a way to avoid coercion

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It is curious how G. Bazin looked at attendance: “As for exhibitions, amateurs and scholars alike resent the phenomenon of mass attendance...”<sup>61</sup>. In the late sixties, a chief curator at the Louvre museum had a simple task, as the world of museums was steadfastly against any notion of mass culture, culture for the masses or masses within culture. Harold Rosenberg<sup>62</sup> called this traditional museum public “the community of connoisseurs” who were self sufficient and self-contained. It is a great injustice to treat visitors to a museum by the standards of the educated elite. Was Bazin implying that visiting was becoming too important and thus endangering the other functions of museums? Quite possibly. Later on, as he spoke of cataloguing and scientific publications, he complained that “curators disdain this kind of work which once was their *raison d’être*”<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, that may

<sup>61</sup>Bazin, Germain. *The Museum Age*. New York, Universe Books, 1967. P.7

<sup>62</sup>Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) was an American writer, educator, philosopher and art critic.

<sup>63</sup>Bazin, Germain. *The Museum Age*. New York, Universe Books, 1967. P.7

be true to quite an extent with blockbusters imposing on practice. In a communicational definition of a museum, this basic work is naturally incorporated and understood without mythization. Yet, we still find many museums which take on an anti-hedonist tone in which the explicit expressions of joy and pleasure are disregarded and discouraged - like a reflex reaction to the temptations of being too outward. Museums are, for the most part, still expected to serve scholars and lay visitors simultaneously; at the same time and in the same space. That is a rather hypocritical claim because it is near impossible. One may wonder what a theatre would look like if it was created for philologists, historians of literature, linguists or, - still worse, teatrologists. Elitist museums may eventuate out of someone's wit and expense, but public institutions cannot be for anyone else but the public, - i.e. the appropriate use of language - preferably everyday language. "Museums have a remarkable power of making the uneducated feel inferior"<sup>64</sup>. And still, in relatively recent times a colleague has said that "Museums offer a satisfactory experience to only a small proportion of its visitors and to an even smaller proportion of the community that it serves"<sup>65</sup>.

At the time of G. Bazin, the age of modern museums and contemporary art was still on its emancipatory mission. Contemporary art museums from that past, most likely before the seventies, were propagating a

<sup>64</sup>Kenneth Hudson's often repeated and written phrase.

<sup>65</sup>Lumley, Robert. *The Museum Time-Machine*. Routledge, London, 1988. P.222

seemingly elitist urban culture, which was a valid objective, even though it was not correctly executed. In the following decades contemporary art became the stronghold of the new elites; nowadays we see it has become very much about stage setting for the flux-prêt-a-porter culture and its "celebs". The post-modern art museum did indeed turn towards the so called masses, yet the journey to there was not without deception. Serious, ambitious, art lovers are at loss because curators consented to take the snobs as their favourites, and firmly aligned with art dealers and collectors. The relative success of contemporary art museums is due to a new, media generated, superficial public culture. The mass is artificial; it is there, but it is unimportant because it is a false construct.

The huge market of everything, "unica", "typica", means that rare and exclusive items are often assisted and sometimes directly influenced by the curators. There was a case in a Belgian museum of magnificent African collections where curators, by their expertise, were literally dictating the knowledge their expertise, of the objects, their ranking of quality and significance and, indirectly, their market price. That instance, after it was exposed in Newsweek, was just one of many notorious cases. Testimonies coming from the inner circle are rare and these occurrences are usually hushed away.

### **Useful instead of elitist**

Yet, the disappearance of socially owned heritage institutions, museums being among them, would not, by definition, attend to the needs of the majority (not yet convinced that they can profit from visiting museums) and shouldn't be discouraged. Stemming



from the collective memory and geared towards individual freedom and emancipation, heritage intuitions have the unique opportunity to facilitate societal education for the common good. Art museums, particularly those of contemporary art, are most exposed to mishap by narrowing the initiated circle to an elite made up of an array of publics: from the true elite to the false one, to the aspiring one, to those eager to learn and share, however their attitude is servicing the need badly. In the end they suffer from this public image and appear repulsive to the majority of the population who refrain from art, deeming it as fancy and a passing vogue. The more exalted and detached, the "better" it is: just as it would appear to the false elites.

If change occurs, and why shouldn't we believe it is possible, then it will bring with it the start of the heritage age: the cybernetics of public memory and subsequent direct cultural action. Citizens do not need culture or heritage as another luxury good (when it has any quality), or as a Salvation Army charity soup distributed to the needy. Citizens do need state functions they are able to finance with their own money in order to facilitate their own common needs and maintain civilized levels of solidarity and security. In short the human right to the basic qualities of life. Any other variant leads to loss of quality, uglification, impoverishment, insecurity and despair. Instead of being a democratic tool for equality and access to common values, heritage institutions can become tools of discrimination towards social, national or ethnic groups.

## 5. Escapism, lack of mission and the immediate reality

The fact is, unlike churches, museums have considerable power "to make the uneducated feel inferior"<sup>66</sup>. Much of the transfer of collective memory depends upon the museum environment and approaches to dealing with the visitors. Visitors prefer to frequent institutions and places where they do not experience cognitive dissonances<sup>67</sup>, i.e. they avoid places where their usual behaviour is not acceptable.

Elitism is often confined to delivering esoteric and elevated knowledge to the public on account of their seemingly banal, quotidian and, to a great extent trivial, way of life. Heritage institutions will often offer a hand to drag us towards the dizzying heights of human spiritual and scientific endeavour, but will just as often fail to let us recognize the precious banality of our everyday lives; that need for the small pleasures of understanding and appreciation of our own, humble environments and simple circumstances. Why do they

<sup>66</sup>Hudson, Kenneth. *Museums for the 80's. A Survey of the World's Trends*. Paris, UNESCO and London, MacMillan Press. 1977; he was probably the greatest advocate of museum users, who, as early as 1977, established the European Museum of the Year award. This was a first award scheme to promote the public value of museums.

<sup>67</sup>Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson.

not teach us to understand our environment and appreciate our attainable "minor" values? Because they are too elitist to acknowledge them? Like schools that prefer knowledge that is often too aloof to be applicable to real life situations, so do heritage institutions. We have to have an ideological framework<sup>68</sup> that is grounded by an underlying pattern of values which give meaning to our efforts. Like schools, we have the choice to either merely distribute knowledge that may or may not be useful, or provide insight into the wisdom of everyday living.

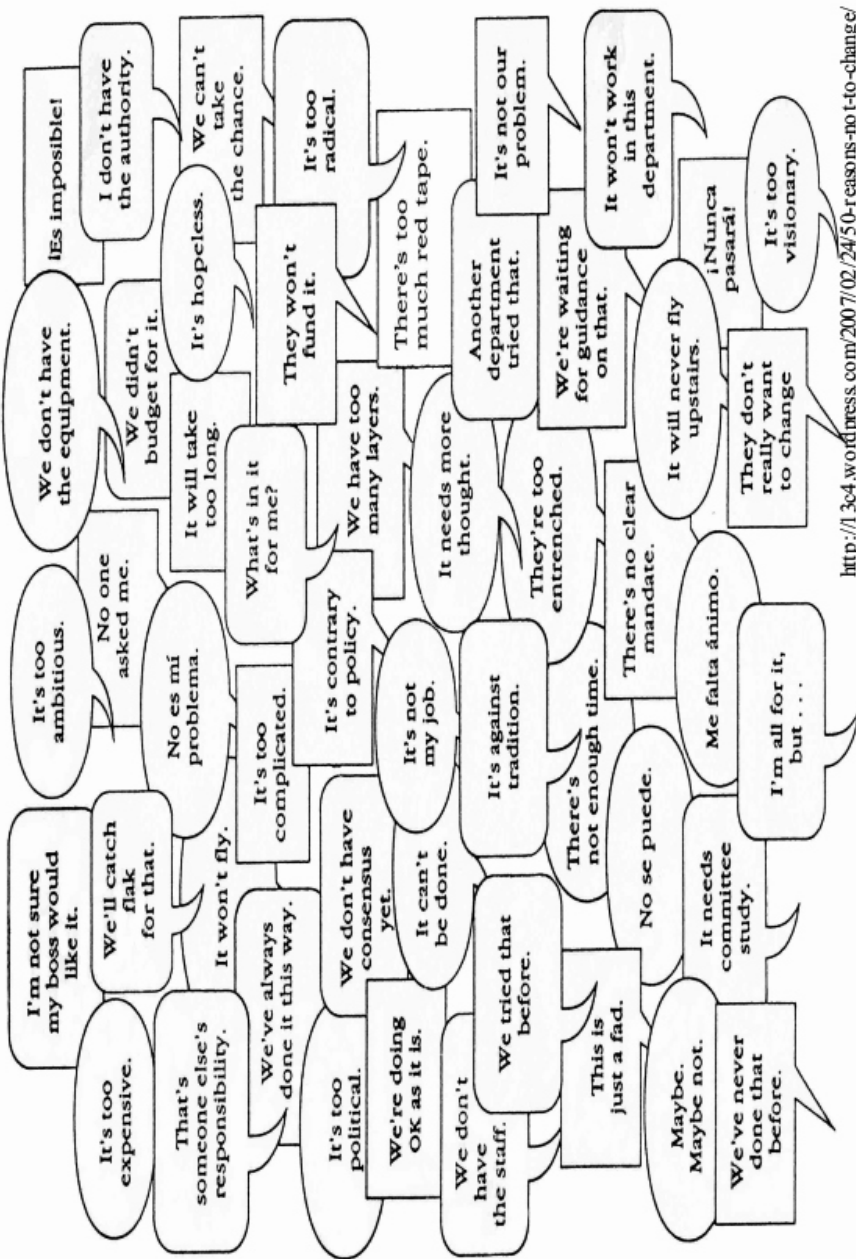
### **Social self exclusion**

The problem with museum institutions was that they were not perceived as active agents within society, but rather, drastically simplified, as trophy repositories where dedicated custodians were expected to know all about the contents. This mythical quality of museums has been retained to the present day. It should neither be continued nor fought against, but rather exploited to secure any obvious, plausible benefits for society.

Public memory institutions are defined both internally, and by culturally conditioned public opinion, as places containing generalized knowledge; though in past decades the shift from general to specific knowledge has been one of their most remarkable achievements. In former times many museums reflected the fictional formula that all characters referenced in the museum are fictitious and

<sup>68</sup>It will remain a matter of political choice which system we agree to regard as plausible as we move towards the realisation of humanist ethics. Not all are, and some are surely not. I argue that the globalizing, West-born capitalism is a scenario of doomsday.

# 50 Reasons Not To Change



bear no resemblance whatsoever to anyone living or dead. Some museums still do. Yet, any coincidence is purely accidental and unintentional. That's too bad in fact, because although we are all unique as individuals, we are experiencing bits and parts of lives and destinies that have already been lived and well documented in our public memory institutions: and that is quite an opportunity to cure our ego and feed our mind. "Museums do not want to be politically motivated, they want to be neutral, but in doing so they neuter the history they portray"<sup>69</sup>. The "Politically correct" objective should not be a new formula of control.

“What we call our culture is far more often than we think the culture of closed institutions”<sup>70</sup>. They stay aloof and separate. Many conventional museums, as they are now, do not help us; they prefer either scientific aloofness or nostalgic *passeism*. Both of these approaches are well tolerated by the power holders (upon which museums are dependent in many ways) and by the educationally conditioned public. By behaving like this they avoid their responsibility to the living environment.

Revealing the true nature of our problems, or responding to the nature of this civil and cultural paradigm, along with its real needs and real troubles, would mean denouncing the causes; and that would lead to criticism, which involves putting oneself at

<sup>69</sup>McLean, Fiona. *Marketing the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1997. p.28

<sup>70</sup>Jourcenar, Margaret. *Hadrijanovi memoari, Otokar Keršovani, Rijeka, 2002, p. 340; English translation by T.S.*

**If you see life  
in a museum,  
you must be facing  
the window.**



© Tomislav Šola, 1989.

risk. When one indicates the problem and sees the cause, it is cowardly to ignore it. To close oneself within the ivory tower of science is therefore a likely form of intentional escapism. When we turn to ourselves in order to forget the problems around us, we may face the very problems we were trying to avoid. It is always us.

One cannot ask that museums behave like Greenpeace activists (although, personally, I have lot of admiration for their direct action). Yet turning away from harsh realities is irresponsible, unfair to tax-payers and lacking in human dimension. Such refusal can hardly support the "raison d'être" of a public institution. This attitude turns museums into sanctioned places, or rather museum reserves, which brings a certain ghettoization to museums. But this is the way it goes for many other institutions. Yet, immersed into Judeo-Christian civilisation, we know that all the western

confessions (and not only them) claim that their primary goal is still, after thousands of years of existence, to translate Christian ideals into life. The religious institutions have failed, and the same inefficiency has been demonstrated by heritage institutions. Reality is harsh, unworthy and undignified, but it is ours. Yet we choose the past as the object of our attention in a sort of neurotic reaction induced by denial or frustration, - an escape from reality. Choosing the latter creates an immediate implication: that of posing rightful claims and making responsible, ethical choices. That is a description of democracy. This is why we are always on the run, why the quantity or occurrence of an activity replaces the quality. We are escaping our everyday lives. Tourism, for instance, is doomed to turn into an industry of dreams and if nothing happens to reverse the trend, we shall live in an ugly, polluted, unhappy place dotted with amusement and (heritage) theme parks. Disney's buoyant, compressed marketing message "The Mouse Planet" will become our tragicomic "alternative" reality.

Museums, as democratic institutions (and this must be so for the most part) should offer this precious opportunity for self-analysis, of insight into the collective processes at work in and outside the community that are relevant to its function. They also have to serve as an information source, as sites for reflection, as forums where democratic decision making is informed by substantive information, and where an argument is provided that enables users to at least form a legitimate position. It would be rather impossible for a museum to function without a

profound understanding of the present environment surrounding it. In fact, everything else is an obvious risk when they forget this: in the long run, they do harm to their users and endanger their own position. A museum with this flaw avoids contact with a problem-afflicted reality that is burdened with conflicting interests.

**What past? What evidence? What truth?  
Why? For whom? Who made history?**

- **Who is there to tell us the unbiased truth?**
- **Should museum collections contain this evidence?**
- **Will museums, like theatres and literature be on our side and be beloved for that?**
- **Can Truth and Beauty find their safe refuge in museums, and use it as a place to act from?**

© Tomislav Šola, 2001.

In order to escape taking sides or creating a bias position, museums avoid commitment and thus ignore the reality that they themselves are part of. When they do so, they declare themselves obliged to protect their “more important” functions of scientific interest and objectivity. They dodge responsibility as well as their clear moral obligation, having been convinced that a strong position would tread on the toes of the people with social, political or economic influence who have the capacity to “punish” them and their employees for insubordination. That is not far from the truth. "It is a



classical posture of literary man to 'point with pride' and 'view with alarm' while scrupulously ignoring what's going on"<sup>71</sup>.

That attitude ultimately denies the social responsibility of museums, which are, of course, funded for the most part (at least in Europe) by tax payers. But any choice comes with a price. As a result of inaptitude, museums do not face the everyday difficulties of their respective communities, and therefore, they suffer from irrelevance: they try to avoid the real problems, either through their permanent exhibitions or temporary ones. They would rather find some specific scientific problem, or yet another "-ism", or a new theme for an art exhibition, rather than force themselves to focus on the needs of their community and develop a programme to serve it. This attitude has developed over time into an escapist impulse of splendid irrelevance; a sort of chic refuge from banal reality that is reminiscent of the poignant cynicism of Marie Antoinette when she carelessly instructed the starving crowd to eat cake if they lack bread.

If museums could appropriate a cybernetic role in guiding the management of society, they would become part of the auto-regulative system of their respective society, community or group. By outlining the obvious deviations of a certain value system that is inbuilt in the wider definition of democratic prosperity and human rights, museums should (like any other

<sup>71</sup>This is not my phrase, I have heard it while studying in Paris in 1979.

public minded institution) produce adaptive and corrective impulses. By reacting to general problems and challenges for the public good, they assume responsibility and become a site of hope, support, comfort and consolation to the community or group(s) they are supposed to serve. That sounds somewhat unscientific, but however banal it seems, this is what life expects from us: only with this mind-set does the science itself make sense.

### **Heritage professionals: traitors and losers?**

Intellectuals have hardly ever had such a poor role in society as they do today. Great, emancipative ideologies may well have seen their great influence reverted tragically into caricature by the ever waiting mediocrities and power seekers. Heritage professionals do not exist in the true sense yet, but the way they are currently, they feel like outsiders and are perceived publicly as such. We are facing hard times; an immediate future in which culture itself will have difficulty defending its own importance. Curators in museums will experience new pressures to become more relevant for development. They will have to impose themselves as relevant for the meritum of what sustainable development represents: the wisdom of taking, but at the same time maintaining; collective productive potential; the wisdom of changing, but at the same time retaining the generative forces of that particular identity. The predicted outcome favours losers, but since nobody from the world of power holders expects it, they just might become sudden, unexpected victors. Democracy, which seems to be the touchstone for our future, will only survive with authentic, solid, straight, honest and well founded -

knowledge? No, wisdom. To play an important part - or better still a decisive role - in the salvation of the world<sup>72</sup> would be a good starting point for the establishment of a new, grand profession.

Curious circular logic would have it that we always return to the same places only in different circumstances as the developmental spiral progresses through time. Neo-liberalism is not a political ideology but a permissive attitude in which the "self-regulatory" economy (or its moguls) makes decisions according to the market logic. This abrogates democracy in its basic definition. Civil society echoes historically to a new totalitarian rule, to a specific totalitarian experience. Pink totalitarianism<sup>73</sup> is again repositioning intellectuals at the very edge of society. They are replaced by an acceptable, correct "intelligentsia", who mainly occupy the role of safeguarding them against takeover from some unstable or anarchist factions and the false, self-made, instant "cultural" elites who are products of the improvised educational system of paid schools and superficial media and internet hype. There are no snobs any more: they have taken over and, paradoxically, they seem to be behind the wheel: the imitators lacking criteria and epigones, these creatively impotent mediocrities who are adept at business, now dictate how things should be and,

<sup>72</sup>Of course, this emphatic claim can be easily disqualified as arbitrary, but "salvation" is exactly the word Dillon S. Ripley, a great, conservative but visionary, Smithsonian Institution director, was assigning to museums in the late 1970s, when I heard him speak.

<sup>73</sup>The neologism is mine, as, I believe, it expresses the hypocritical, pharisaical nature of the modern capitalism well.

what's more, they take their role seriously. If the rule is that "anything goes", then why not reverse the flow of prevailing values? They are the new opinion makers. This devalues real creative individuals and ranks their specificity, responsibility and creativeness at the lowest level. Those who are true and creative are, however, invited to dinners and meetings because they are a constant reminder of what originality looked and sounded like. For these pretenders, they are an invaluable source of inspiration that feeds their manipulative mimicry. Yet they are understood to be difficult and unpredictable; their insistence on rules, criteria, dedicated focus in research and honesty in declaring their findings, are feared qualities because they disturb the managed, arranged realities that instruct the masses on how they should live. One would have to be a genius to be invited and "accepted". The few geniuses in circulation are, by way of their exceptionality, more proof of a "karaoke" flux-reality, than of their own legitimacy. Public prestige is the weak point for the power holders. Any upstanding society cannot, however, dwell upon isolated geniuses, but must focus on the wide spectrum of capable scientist as well as the entire creative class that oversees the reflective, inquisitive part of society that is guided by a cultivated sense of good values and good taste. Values and taste appear to have been expelled from the scientific world, which does not seem to want to deal with such emotionally vibrant territory. The humanist elite are not invited to the incessant parties and team building events where the contemporary culture and its managerial network are established, because they are taken for imposers and nuisances. Part of the reason for is growing dependence on

science in corporative business is owing to general disenchantment with the social and humanities disciplines and their related professions. In whichever domain the powerful industries settle to follow up opportunities for profit, science is at loss because it must change its priorities to suit profitable objectives.

Becoming a traitor, as opposed to a loser, is looking likely to become the destiny of many intellectuals because, in the end, it is easier to take part in a rotten game that pays off, rather than persevering with one's own vision and principles of good taste and measure. For many the result is escapism, having tacitly agreed to their role on the proviso that they are given a certain level of autonomy and a paid position. Museum scientists are still the reality of many museums, especially in the fields of natural science and archaeology. In the name of sacred science, they prefer to continue their research in peace, undisturbed by the requirements of (true) marketing, which requires something "marketable"; a much needed product. Institutions are comprised of people and they are mere projections of the ruling classes which preside over them. If museums cannot raise arguments for simplicity, common sense and clear objectives in order to assist with the generative forces of their community identity, then they are part of the problem, not the solution. A museum, that is important enough to cultivate and fight for research will form a professional phalange to protect and support indispensable, useful and "profitable" research. Not many museums are really equipped, capable or able to pursue constant full time scientific research programs so they combine resources with other parties and will outsource, just as

they do when seeking specific or expert advice. The attitudes and ambitions of a serious investigative journalist would provide just the right measure of responsibility required by many a museum. It is right to presume that museums, rather the entire heritage sector, take part in the process that will lead us to a point where we have influential exhibitions (whether they are permanent or temporary), provocative action that is able to inform and generate attention, initiate public discussion, assist public insight and, within the scope of intended outcomes, change and improve the human condition. Big words? Why not? In truth, not really. Any waterfall consists of individual drops. If a small museum creates an exhibition on the identity of its local town with the aim of contributing to its development planning, then that may well be the case: the ancient alley of two hundred centrally positioned chestnut trees that stretch as long as the town, is likely to become a target for greed through the unnecessary regulation of traffic and fabricated, imposed concessions for a parking lot. The local assembly, softened by false promises, and assisted by a clandestinely planned, discrete media campaign, is ready to vote for the removal of the most historic and graceful feature of this little picturesque town. An exhibition has the capacity to demonstrate how beautiful, old, rare, useful and highly regarded the chestnut alley is by the community in its present and historical dimension. It could serve as proper briefing for voters and would certainly be effective in formulating public opinion. Life is better with the alley saved. Yet it may still become even better if the museum remains in tune with such practices and strategies. It is not about chestnuts, but about raising

awareness, educating, building criteria and promoting self-respect. If heritage institutions unite, we can establish secure options amongst the consistent and dramatically changing circumstances that shape life and devour quality.

The destiny of intellectuals is shared by public institutions as their roles coincide. Both realize themselves by taking on the hard task of providing a counteractive role, - always adding to arguments to the societal situation that are convincing and considerable enough to balance what has been disrupted or perverted. Neither of them can ever permanently take on the safe side of an on-going conflict of interests. Conversely, the risky move is to take on the role of *advocatus diaboli*. That task is always reserved for the unbiased, non-aligned, independent and well intentioned institution. This *coûte-qui-coûte* attitude, which is not motivated by personal or institutional success with the preponderant forces of society, is the ideal position for public institutions. It's a pity that no mansion or stately home tells the story of the ugly world of serfs, servants and scenes set on the backstage of historical privilege. One should not advocate revengeful or revolutionary fervour, but simply an honest glimpse into the reality of yesterday for the curious citizens of today. But would telling such a story suggest that the circumstances changed but trouble remained? Is that the reason we do tell it?

As the world fights back at the entropy of globalisation, we are witnessing a spontaneous reaction which is creating fragmentation: where global business and its (increasingly eager servant) politics build up continental regions of composite identities

and we see the upsurge of local, micro identities believed to be extinct or on the verge of it, gasping for some recognition, as though their imminent disappearance has served as a drastic reminder for survival. We also see new nationalisms, identity inspired warfare, wars stemming from the Americans, i.e. the corporative doctrine of world domination, revolutions, crisis, unrest....Museums, to name the most exposed among all of the heritage institutions, have almost entirely failed to respond. Over time, they have remained an adornment of the ruling groups, of the media, of conformists and opportunists. The other additional option is to turn into a quasi-lucrative sector; a sort of soft business that services the needs of destination management including tourism, cultural industry and, indirectly, hard business. The endangered world is reacting in panic by calling out for more museums, more storage of collective memory and more channels for its communication. So one might say that museums grow in number and size like mushrooms, but isn't it time to ask, perhaps naively - are they all edible? The claim may be that communities do get museums, but have difficulty expressing their dissatisfaction with them. Citizens are hardly qualified to demand any specific expert solutions and therefore have to rely on public institutions. The responsibility and professionalism of these institutions represents the only guarantee for a quality outcome and that can only arise from professional insight or by researching the needs.

The most dangerous development we are currently witnessing is the fact that contemporary people are so saturated with manipulative information and so



engrossed in working for survival, or to attain imposed values, that any sane voice urging attention and action has become hardly audible at all. The media has created a deepening disapproval towards “useless eccentrics”, though state employed bureaucrats, along with scientists, helped them along significantly. Institutional sinecures were, or still are, frequent motivators in many developing societies. In the meantime, the Fair is in full swing and its merry-go-round is circling quicker and quicker. One can only hope that troubled times will serve as a good reminder of who to listen to. The hope is that there will be time to apply some of this wisdom. I would suggest that heritage institutions will become some of the most reliable sources of truth in the times to come. So far, many have learned how to speak in a way that the public listens to attentively, but still, only some of them have learned how to hear.

Out of a growing clash of interests around feeble politics, museums now engage in cross-community engagement in the hope of finding solutions. They are de-mystifying certain notions and ideas by focussing on difference; to increase awareness, visibility and consideration of it. Being aware of the fatal imperfections of the social contract, we recognise how much public institutions can contribute to the better understanding and social inclusion of gender, sexual or ethnic minorities.

### **Lack of mission**

If museums and other heritage institutions do not resemble some sort of collective intellectual body that is keenly astute to its societal mission, then what should their role be? Contemplating the past, living the

usable present and projecting towards a viable future, is what it's all about. Yet, somehow, "we lost our ability to imagine the world right around the corner"<sup>74</sup>; the task which was left, as the author seems to rightly claim, "to the most retrograde among the content providers, - the literary novelists". This may well reiterate that the heritage profession should one day become the content provider, when contemplating the methods and outcomes of sustainable development. "By repressing quasi-independent groups and by guiding all work largely by through-and-through supervision we eliminate as far as possible the feeling that one's immediate task is an end in itself and not a means to a far more important end"<sup>75</sup>. The mission remains: dedication to the common good and a sustained commitment to the societal project that is based on humanistic ethics<sup>76</sup>. This wasn't so at the beginning, museums were created according to Cartesian "res extensa", - the universe is a machine and so are we in it, - therefore, museums should be a sort of mechanical reaction to the change of their environment; partly in order to witness the conquest and make profits obvious, and partly to register the losses. A museum of war is *contradictio in adjecto* because museums are there to perpetuate values, and hatred, in whatever form, is not to be continued. So,

<sup>74</sup>Kelly, Kevin. The Mission Near Future. New York Times, 19.12.2010.

<sup>75</sup>Dana, John Cotton. A Plan for a New Museum. The Elm Tree Press: Woodstock, Vermont, 1920. p.48

<sup>76</sup>As much as one might say that Jesuits are advocating faith for the Church, whereas the Franciscans promote the faith for Life.

some museums became museums for peace, and even those often speak about the specific technicalities of the battles instead of human destinies; of those in the trenches, because it's there that we find the messages we can all use. Their words are the ones we need to know. Karl Mannheim claimed that the very ability to communicate ideas about painful issues strongly resembles their solution. Resemblance, if we take it as inspiration, may well provoke solutions.

It seems to be relatively easy to restore and reconstruct entire streets within a museum, but performing the same task in a real city, outside the museum, is rather a painful task. That first phase has been accomplished often enough, but the second misses the mark, and stands little chance of ever reaching it with developers and biased politicians. This is why desired "reality", the fight for quality, for survival, is permitted and comfortably housed inside museums. The decision makers prefer creative industries creating fabricated, kitschy products instead of indulging in seemingly expensive conservation projects. We have an emerging profession looking for the chance to join and take part in decision making, or opinion making, at least.

An ethnologist says: "Only the individuals oppose,

Do we care for  
their wishes or  
their needs?



like guerrillas to the forced, shameful destruction of rain forests"<sup>77</sup>. Museums scrupulously respond to the problems within their walls by drowning them in masses of other information. Yes, they should go out, confront the United Nations with global conservationist declarations and create a global network of traveling exhibitions and public actions. But every individual in the community that the museum is supposed to serve is as important as the United Nations. We know what goes wrong and why, but we do not dare put forward our opinions and, thus, we decline the moral obligation to invite others to oppose. We are not here solely to explain the past of rain forests, or in fact, the past of anything: *Res, non verba!*

<sup>77</sup>Mausser, Bruno. *Parmis les Punans a Borneo, au forets du Sarawak*. No.85, Jan. 1994.; to be honest, I have no information on the magazine in question; his destiny as an activist, ecologist and ethnographer seems to have been tragic and I hope it is known to some colleagues.

When faced with rigid scientific rules, conventional heritage institutions choose a non-conflicting, demonstrable, provable version of reality, which surmounts to complete avoidance of complex, delicate truths. And so, every "anxiety-inducing deduction" is blocked out. A mission that aims at creating a better and nobler life should strive to orient itself towards problem-solving. In times of peace and prosperity, museums seem to be just fine. The moment an ethnic intolerance, or civil war takes place, museums take sides. They make exhibitions that support the position of the ruling powers of the country, or they close for the sake of securing their collections. The world is experiencing the collapse of values to live by, in fact, there is a catastrophe developing in front of our eyes. The suffering of the planet requires all those who are well-intentioned, noble and wise to at least provide comfort, if not a solution, to the problems. Can museums show the degree of misery that is inflicted on the Third World in order to supply the West and North with cheap consumer products? Shall we all batten down our arguments and each deny our part as we haggle over the root cause of this amounting tragedy. The list of concrete problems is getting longer and it must be permitted a place on the heritage institutions' agenda. But, as Kenneth Galbraith has stated (to imply that our problems are rather general in character): "We are incredibly intelligent to avoid the answers to difficult questions".

## **Democracy: the rightful claim**

The "Something for everyone"<sup>78</sup> approach is lacking any apparent focus or target audience, and is akin to sending letters without an address written on the envelope. In an effort to escape the ordinary and the commonplace, museums avoid one of the tasks that they should implicitly carry out: to lessen social and cultural inequalities. The language of objects in a "montage of attractions"<sup>79</sup>, together with the immense possibilities provided by audio-video technology means that potential is limited only by creativity and conviction, or a lack of them. Since the time of their beginning, museums have been made and controlled by the aristocracy and plutocracy. Today, the corporate world is taking over what was reluctantly administered under the conformist supervision of the state. Thus, museums were never entirely autonomous. The two totalitarian systems demonstrated that they were ready, obedient tools in the hands of the ruling elites. Once these systems were gone, museums continued to serve science and, increasingly, the user - the community. The claim was ever<sup>80</sup>, that museums were non-political institutions, and the issuing consequence was that curators were the same. But claiming that they

<sup>78</sup>McLean, Fiona. *Marketing the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1997. p.98

<sup>79</sup>From the book of the same name, written by Sergei Eisenstein

<sup>80</sup>Stepping into the museum profession internationally at the General Conference of ICOM in Mexico City in 1981, I proposed that the next theme of the Committee on Museology be "Museums and Politics". It was laughed out and dismissed as the misbehavior of a young radical mind; in the meantime, they changed their tune i.e. agreed to a minimal concession and I stayed with my convictions.

are not political is already a political statement. And, not an insignificant one, however wrong it may be! In fact, museums, as well as other heritage institutions, are highly political by their very nature, i.e. the moment they exercise that nature in a creative and responsible way. So their tacit consent, which allowed the right-wing parties seized the theme of national identity (as legitimately belonging to them), is the first big, bad consequence of institutional self-exclusion. A colourful vision of wealthy and powerful individuals<sup>81</sup> won over the long "grey" dream of the social welfare state. The Left has never understood the delicate themes of identity and always insisted upon internationalisation. On the other hand, the Right always usurped the right to themes of heritage and identity and insisted upon nationalism. There is no argument to justify this usurpation. The irony is that the Left has failed in this media war and practically ceased to exist, at which point the Right was then able to channel internationalisation into globalisation. As ever, it remains interested in these themes only for the sake of maintaining their own power. The fact that this was allowed to happen without any sign of protest was a double failure on the part of the entire heritage sector<sup>82</sup>, and quite a debilitating turn.

Democratically conceived institutions came to life gradually as the ideal of the welfare state was emerging, especially in Europe. With the rise of the

<sup>81</sup>This is a form of inverted democracy that is so well expressed in the American Dream: that we can all become rich and dominate others.

<sup>82</sup>We are probably talking about 100 thousand museums employing some 1.5 million workers. Other heritage institutions, depending upon definitions, would reflect an impressive number.

globalist capitalism of trans-national and trans-cultural corporations the state is swiftly becoming impoverished, deserting its citizens and exposing the former public sector to the "laws" of the market. The democratic potential of museums can develop only through rising accessibility and by offering a programme that is based upon the real needs of the population. The process started long ago, what was celebrated in the sixties has now become endangered by a market obsession (not a mere orientation) that is penetrating the entire cultural sector.

Can we talk corporative capital into  
sustainable development?

It is like asking,

a serial killer to reduce killings,  
a brigand to rob only when in the need,  
or persuading a glutton to eat only when hungry ....

**The GREED  
is immune to any argument  
beyond its own character.**

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The market is fine if it does not inundate and permeate the education, health care, heritage, living culture and private relations sectors. The regulatory 20-30% of the market logic, presence and exposure, is a healthy corrective to these sensible domains. So the market will sometimes influence them for the better, like



increasing performance, establishing a fair alliance of interests (sponsorship, patronage) and clearing up the dilemma of who serves whom; who the boss is. If it is applied as the dominant force, it will turn out to be disastrous for the delicate tissue of anything that resists the ultimate dictations of the market. The human race expected ever more of itself and longed for a future in which it could realize its dreams. The collective man we are creating is increasingly forgetful of these strenuous schemes, let alone the ideologies that might give them meaning. This is why we live in an 'de-ideologized' society; one in which *eutopia*<sup>83</sup> stands for the idealist dream of *utopia*. Big Brother only tolerates insecure, neurotic individuals and wants us all to become as such so that we can be easily owned and managed. No system in the past has been pumped so full of democracy and harbours so little sincerity to pursue its claims, as this quasi-medieval, post-humanist capitalism<sup>84</sup>. This is why heritage and educational institutions have to be put into the position of no response, into a certain intellectual and moral ataxy, where they are unable to teach us how to resist this ruthless, predatory greed,

<sup>83</sup>Eutopia is a homophone of utopia, which expresses the idea of perfect human existence. Rarely used outside of academic circles, this word combines the Greek prefix eu meaning good, happy, or pleasing, with the Greek suffix topos, describing a place or localized region. In 1516, Thomas More paired this word with a different one, outopia, meaning "no place," to coin a fresh term, utopia. While More's term is used to describe one of any number of idealistic, fictional political systems, eutopia simply refers to a place of happiness.  
<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-eutopia.htm>

<sup>84</sup>The rare Western reader who has endured this chapter will find these ideas and wording somewhat radical. They are not. Judging by oneself alone, no one would be able to understand anyone else. The prevailing majority of at the Planet is suffering the worst version of westernization; a mutation of the already imperfect original.

which is unprecedented in its sophistication. It creates its own "culture" and value system, and is subtly promoted to be liberating, but it only serves to enslave human beings and lock them into the invisible shackles of modern slavery, into the "political" system of *pink totalitarianism*<sup>85</sup>. We are probably living in the final decennie or two of the last politicians. Politics, formerly a promising art of mediation and management of the societal project, has been reduced to a hideous, selfish game. The vast majority of politicians are non-existent. They have turned into mere clerks and scribes for major corporations - into their commissioners and brokers - the directors, jugglers and geeks in the greatest show on earth; the farce called democracy. Can they pass unnoticed with their negative agenda? Should they? Who else but us, the guardians of public memory, would know better that they have always been there and that we can identify and expose them by showing an array of their faces throughout time and space? Do we do it? Well, no.

Democracy does not give the right to be manipulated into giving credentials to one set of traitors over another (because our choice is so narrowed). But it does permit a society that provides equal chances, responsible choices and the prevailing rule of wisdom. Utopia? Why not? No value in its purest quality would

<sup>85</sup>This neologism is my own syntagm through which I want to suggest the pharisaical and sanctimonious nature of modern western societies and describe in a usable manner the politico-economical paradigm of the New Order.

# DEMOCRACY

Regarding the basic qualifications of their staff, cultural heritage institutions and other associations should promote the adoption of the European Computer Driving License (ECDL).

## **Why not European Democracy Driving Licence? EDDL?**

Education for quality, freedom and creativity can also be obtained from heritage institutions

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bear a different description. For decades the production of lonely, insecure, frustrated, impoverished, disoriented and discouraged individuals and communities have been the most profitable product belonging to the evil synergy of the religious, political and business power holders. Can we offer any consolation or hope?

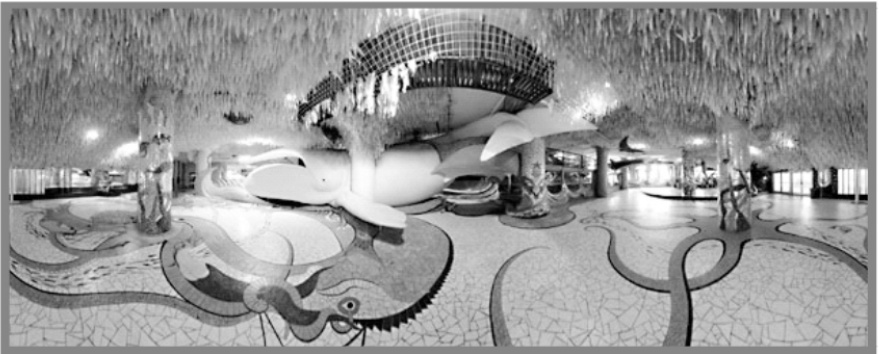
## 6. Euphoria and kitsch?

### **The danger of sensationalism and populism**

Without necessary professional education, clear professional consciousness and professional intelligence, directors and curators may find themselves too heavily influenced by business and profit. Indiscriminate relations towards the public and financial success of the heritage industry can transform museums into fun fairs. That places scientific focus and reliability into a subordinate position. The museum potential is wasted on satisfying the whims of the average visitor and not on catering for their real needs. The media, in its constant penchant for shallow sensationalism, creates and supports the commoditisation of culture and leaving it devoid of its true role. They follow the line of responding to the lowest instincts, a sort of "populique voluptas"<sup>86</sup> (as emperor Maximilianus put it). The kitschy attitude that transforms the view of the world into one of regret for times lost is a temptation for individuals, groups and institutions alike. And it is not a sign of superior intelligence, at that.

<sup>86</sup>Popular sensual pleasure

Whichever way they try, EUPHORIA is not the product of museums. Put simply, they don't stand a chance against the omnipotent entertainment industry. Therefore, whenever museums make a substantive attempt, only creativity can save them from compromising their basic mission. European museums are inclined to excessive seriousness, due to the long history of learned societies and Maecenas, being greatly supported, for the most part, or even owned by the state, regions or cities. That bears a frustration that has to be controlled. Losing all sense of measure can lead to another mistake of being superficial and shallow.



**Euphoria is  
the third way**

American museums, alternatively, are almost all private and run by ambitious, entrepreneurial Boards who strive for public recognition. The situation with the media there presents an additional temptation towards the lure of public success which, in the case of some cities, turns museums into a big business of incessant exhibiting and blockbuster projects. Needless to say, museums often risk their professional integrity in doing so. The consent of the masses - of a mob - cannot be the measure of quality. Professionalism will always be the ability to strike the proper balance between the possible, suggested extremes. When museums just invite people to passively consume their offerings it becomes mere "museum arrogance"<sup>87</sup>, which is as harmful as any practice on the other extreme.

But both sorts of conventional museum seem to take on a ritual function, freeing the visitor from the mere, banal "here and now". While this is a legitimate method of any cosy, entertainment ambition, the true solution will lie in the mixture of divergent ambitions, indeed, in a sort of new language; a kind of applied art of heritage communication

There has always been a tension in museums concerning their diverse and partially, though often seemingly, opposed tasks. To be scientific is often assumed to automatically encompass an educational quality, but what kind of scientific relevance does recreation require? Well of course, one could have

<sup>87</sup>Lewis, Peter. The Role of Marketing. in Ambrose, Timothy; Runyard, Sue. Forward Planning. Museums and galleries Commission in Conjunction with Routledge, London / New York, 1991. p. 26

## The three ways of communicating

for heritage institutions

- **Euphoria** ENTERTAINMENT  
■ curry favour with the consumers
- **Scientia** KNOWLEDGE  
■ scientific discourse
- **Spiritus** ART  
■ fiction representing the principles and forms of reality so as to explain the values of phenomena

© Tomislav Šola, 2007.

predicted that education would have to be pleasant and amusing to some degree, in order to be effective. By the 1980s everybody had adopted the expression: edutainment. Like all "buzz words" it actually solved very little. For those who understood the problem, it was a timely reminder of the difficult balance, and for the majority, it served only to rationalize the problem: they had solved it by giving it a name. Striking the balance between seemingly opposed demands has always been the measure of professionalism: in museums it is the duty to facilitate scholarship and the duty to entertain the visitors. Horatio was clear in his poetry two millennia ago, saying "Aut delectare aut prodesse!" This exclamation might have only been a cry against the pervasive verse-mongering of the idle class, in favour of the art of poetry. Yet, we are forced to take the full challenge by adjusting it to: *Delectare et prodesse!* To entertain and be useful. Only with

professional maturity will museums be able to determine the limits between attractive communication on the one side, as a concession to comfort and understanding, and the question of relevance on the other. The same distinction is necessary elsewhere: between kitsch and art, eroticism and pornography, entertainment and vulgarity, authority and tyranny, freedom and anarchy and so on.

However wrong a museum might be for behaving like a frowning professor who is completely disinterested in the practicalities of life, it is equally wrong to turn the museum into a vainglorious funfair of superficial entertainment. In response to the task of hitting the right balance, Horatio's inspired *delectare et prodesse* makes a good case for the missing professionalism. Tourists made museums paradoxical places. Museums are supposed to serve local identity and the needs of local people, but they have become increasingly frequented by foreigners who are eager to learn about the place they are visiting. Trying to please them may result not only in a story differently told, but also one that is interpreted differently to suit their need for attraction. And, one thing more: fiction cannot be condemned from museums: most of the wisdom we boast with came to us by the way of fiction. The "fictiveness" of badly interpreted facts could only be a reminder of this truth and of the issuing professional task: not a simple one, at that, and yet the challenge for a profession, not for a mere occupation.



## 7. Eurocentrism as cultural colonialism

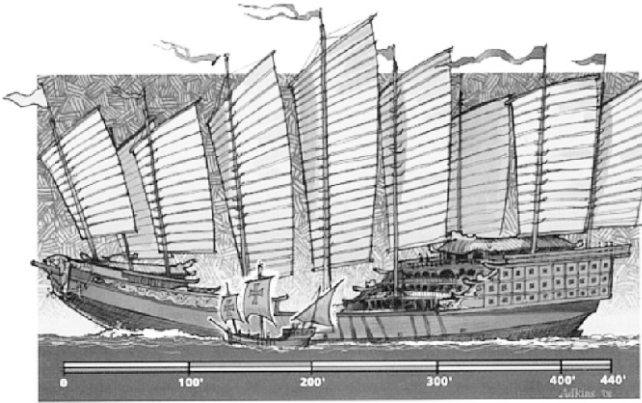
European museums, or probably Western museums, are often arrogant or big and arrogant as Western people are. Their benevolence towards others outside the western cultural circle and developed countries is in most cases just good manners and civilized behaviour and does not reflect their real attitudes. Any analysis of the subtleties of wording, including juxtapositions, use of expressions or avoidance of themes would easily prove that fact. It would also testify to a tolerance that is, in most cases, derived from an intellectual standpoint rather than affective quality. The average western citizen is convinced that the people in the underdeveloped world are filthy and lazy, primitive and unable to organize their society in an efficient way<sup>88</sup>. Why it is that heritage institutions and the humanities do not at least tell the truth? "Wrong" may only be wrong because it is compared to our "right".

Europeans and their descendants imposed themselves as the measure of things. Who discovered the world?<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup>Of course, any decent intellectual or curator would vehemently protest against this, but we are not referring to enlightened individuals.

<sup>89</sup>Zheng He (1371-1433), Chinese mariner, explorer, diplomat and fleet admiral, who commanded voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa, collectively referred to as the Voyages of Zheng He or Voyages of Cheng Ho from 1405 to 1433. The diagram shows the comparison of the presumed dimensions of his ship to that of Ch. Columbus.

No place for Eurocentrism....



What is the consequence of discovery? How are discoveries used? Does ruling the world for such a period of time give the westerners any advantage in their interpretations of it? What is greatness or superiority in the broader context? Does time have to be as fast paced as ours; have we caused their problems as a result of imposing our value systems over theirs? Doesn't everybody have the basic right to live by their own rules and criteria? Any culture has this right by definition, but we have an implied expectation that others should somehow understand English and follow our understandings of what is good or bad. Our relationship with nature and attitudes towards development has brought the entire world to the brink of cataclysm. Would their values have done the same?

### **Devaluing others**

Long has passed since the days when museums excited visitors like a zoo in which "primitive people" were

exposed<sup>90</sup>. In 1876, Carl Hagenbeck, the father of zoos and animal trading, put together a European travelling exhibition of live animals and "wild" people, Nubians in that particular case. That endeavour encouraged a collaborator to return to the Egyptian Sudan in search of more wild beasts and Nubians. In his Hamburg Tierpark, at another successful show, he had exposed an "Esquimaux" (Inuit) from Labrador. "Hagenbeck's exhibit of human beings, considered as "savages" in a "natural state," was the probable source of inspiration for Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire's "human zoo" exhibition, in the Jardin d'acclimatation in Paris. In 1877 Saint-Hilaire organized two "ethnological exhibitions," presenting Nubians and Inuits to the public, thus succeeding to double the entrees of the zoo"<sup>91</sup>.

But that was a period characterised by such attitudes, which have since been abandoned, except in instances of racism and intolerance. Even when museum objects originate from other cultures and civilisations, attempts to understand them are usually made from the Occidental point of view. They are exposed entirely without context and represent cultures known to some extent by experts only; these objects are hardly more than strange, enigmatic aesthetic facts. Besides, taken in their expatriated reality, these objects are (though collected out of scientific interest) testimonies of colonial victories, spoils of wars and conquests and the consequences of looting distant disadvantaged cultures. A disregard for the original

<sup>90</sup>Alexander, Edward, P. *Museum Masters and Their Museums and Their Influence*. AASLH, Nashville, 1983., po. 311-340

<sup>91</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl\\_Hagenbeck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Hagenbeck)

meaning of objects or for the appropriate methods of their display (contrary to the spirit of the culture they belong to) is a sign of ignorance and a domineering attitude that should be denounced by any public cultural institution, let alone museums, who are endowed with a humanist mission. Exhibiting the Royal drum<sup>92</sup>, belonging to the Ankole tribe (South East Africa) is sacrilege: an entire generation may pass that won't have ever set eyes on it, important as it is, and yet it is exposed to the eyes of crowds of foreigners in a museum that acquired the object through distressing circumstances.

Exhibiting human remains from other cultures is part of that attitude and, at last, we have reached a point where it is the object of much restitution. Museums manifest similar frivolous attitudes towards human remains from other historic epochs, which is itself a sort of disrespectful cultural colonialism. The scientific and museum traditions that legitimise the excavation and exhibition of posthumous remains are morally questionable, - a fact that does not sound heretic any more. Past approaches, whether motivated by science or mere curiosity, were all too often coloured by disparaging attitudes and, thus, what we happen to find in our museums and archives must now be rectified. The remnants of pagan customs were declared at the time of their discoveries as "consuetudines non laudabiles" or in other cases reduced to "antiquitates vulgares"<sup>93</sup>, both obviously non-collectibles. The criterion that was established

<sup>92</sup>Fabietti, Ugo; Malighetti, Roberto; Matera, Vincenzo. *Od lokalnog do globalnog*. Clío, Beograd, 2002. P.203

<sup>93</sup>Fabietti, Ugo; Malighetti, Roberto; Matera, Vincenzo. *Od lokalnog do globalnog*. Clío, Beograd, 2002. p. 67

resulted in the imposing interests of the conquerors being inflicted onto primitive cultures who suffered fatal encounters as "the West threw dirt into the face of mankind"<sup>94</sup>. European and other western museums are crammed with works of art and religious objects from other cultures. The barbarous pillaging of these artefacts seem to be almost laundered and cleansed by the dignified splendour of our museums: "In Khmer statuary there were many admirable heads on conventional bodies; these heads, removed from the bodies, are now the glory of the Guimet Museum"<sup>95</sup>.

In the last decade, the field of Anthropology has finally been able to admit to the century long obtrusion they have inflicted on other cultures and civilisations. It was an immoral and disrespectful venture to expose them to such regular cynical examination without obtaining their consent. In the West, science has obtained the privileged position of favoured advantage having followed its own interests and, undoubtedly, bringing about extraordinary results. Yet, losses in our reputation have produced unfounded pride and a disdain for others. Eventually, the West has proved to be dangerously harmful to the Planet. We are so immersed in our supposed right to inspect, interpret and conquer "inferior" others, that it never occurred to us to think how would we feel if we were inspected and treated like this by others. Representing other cultures, if we understand what culture means, should be done only with the consent and cooperation of those concerned. That approach would inspire methods of

<sup>94</sup>Fabietti, Ugo; Malighetti, Roberto; Matera, Vincenzo. *Od lokalnog do globalnog*. Clio, Beograd, 2002. p. 36, referring to C.L.Strauss, 1960

<sup>95</sup>Malraux, Andre. *The Psychology of Art. Museums Without Walls*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1950. P.27

cooperation whereby the exhibition reflects only the external, symbolic aspect of a much deeper process of collaboration and understanding.

So shouldn't we make some changes or reverse our practices as a real profession would demand? Museums must accept the cultural consequences of globalisation and open themselves to the primary owners of those treasures.



In May 2011 London's Natural History Museum returned the skulls of three indigenous people to Australia. These are part of a wider group of remains of more than 100 individuals collected in the Torres Strait Islands that will eventually be returned<sup>96</sup>.

Giving back, in some cases, is a matter of compelling, ethically based legislation, while in others, it's just a moral implication, as noble as any moral is, which will lead to new ways of operating; to a whole new world of possibilities that will spread into the still unconquered domains of authentic goodwill and cooperation. Why

<sup>96</sup><http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-13308981>

should economic globalisation result in simply a new formula of colonisation, when we have an opportunity to use it to unite this small planet of ours? Of course many nations and communities would, for many reasons, fail to provide a decent standard of care and security for the treasures that were taken from them. But to simplify any problem does not end it; rather that's where it begins. Creative solutions based on a shared cultural and cultured interpretation of the heritage mission are, mostly, yet to be discovered, and there are many. The "win-win" managerial trick can become a reality if we apply true professionalism and all its ethical connotations. It's pertinent to a profession of such an extraordinary mission to not only engage awareness, but the conscience of mankind as well - a noble memory and wisdom that serves as the universal common denominator. That may be the sole valid reason in all of it.

### **The damage of the Western model**

Furthermore, international cultural institutions and global trends favour the export of the Western model of the museum, even to those parts of the world where it does not suit the needs of the local population or their perception of heritage, and where, quite often, "musealisation" represents the ultimate *coup de grace* to an endangered local culture. Had museums been understood in their very essence, i.e. as promoting the protection and continuation of specific values, it would have been clear in many instances that what a fragile local culture needs is some assistance to support their living traditions which perfectly fulfils the role of a museum in the West. All too often we meet colleagues from Asia and Africa who are more western

than the westerners. Paradoxically, they are the protagonists of acculturation, as they have been, for the most part, trained in the West.

Initially the western value system meant the plunder of local artefacts, but after a while, the local community recognized that new demands can be satisfied with the new production of the old stuff. So the motives for creation changed but, inevitably, the forms and colours changed to meet the expectations of the market. For instance, the Maori people from New Zealand produce their *taonga* (valuables, treasure) but without assigning the same intention, care or meaning to them as those created for their rites.

A cultural counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in London commented on how he understood the process of transferring a vase that was made specifically for a particular person or residence, into a museum. He said: "...one can hear its screams as it is dragged to the museum to be killed"<sup>97</sup>. China, which has been more or less closed to outsiders and almost without the temptation of war spoils, always lived with its past; it was valuable because it was perceived as a form of continuity. Therefore, mediating institutions were unnecessary. Why would anybody want to mythicize an original when the same value system, workmanship, quality materials and market could not recognize the notion of the original beyond the originality of the elements that, by default, always produce the same originals? Well, China became westernized, and, why shrink from simple truths, Americanized. This is an oversimplified, but credible

<sup>97</sup>Museums as Slaughter Houses. EMYA NEWS, No.3, 1996



description of discontinuity and the reality of loss; of the type of change that devours identity. When endangered by its own continuity, identity becomes more of a staged, convulsive effort to endure and retain. Thus, heritage is born. Following that, museums come into existence as places that collect, document, research, store, care for and communicate disappearing heritage. Of course, China today, among other superlatives, boasts probably the fastest museum growth rate, particularly in the area of private museums. It seems to be capable of appropriating the Western museum model without too much harm to the local culture, but this fascination with western values is a great temptation. Had they stemmed from Chinese culture, their museums might have been different.

### **Social and political bias**

Only recently have we seen and admired museums that are deliberately representing different points of view, whereas before there was only the dominant, official culture. Still, museums self-censor their practices to comply with the dominant political forces of society. Some still ignore specific aspects of minority groups that exist alongside the dominant culture. The public memory institutions have still remained, to an intolerable extent, a means of ideological reproduction i.e. they are reinforcing the continuation of prominent power relations. Needless to say, their natural inclination should be to work against the imperfections of society, clarifying issues by referring to the lessons of historical experience and acquiring wisdom as a result.

## 8. Fetishism and obsession with originals,

The museum tradition has been burdened by the myth of the original object. In practice, and often in theory as well, a museum is not regarded as proper or legitimate if it does not own and exhibit original three-dimensional objects. It could seem unnecessarily barbaric and materialistic to a visitor from a different civilization that ideas have to be presented as objects<sup>98</sup>. Originality as a sign of authenticity has become a popular and growing commercial issue. Approved products made by a particular producer are protected by law, more often than not, additional value is gained through branding: lifestyle, celebrity etc. There is some real fetishist power at work here, namely around the idea of cherished uniqueness. The reality of human nature, or that of greedy businesses, is hard to beat anyway, and for a number of good reasons. Mass production and reproduction, such as perfect copying, will slowly relativize the fascination with originals and originality will become withdrawn to the spheres of luxury. It will become emblematic and culminate as a counter-occurrence to "anything goes". The claim to originality, on the other hand, will

<sup>98</sup>The Grand Academy of Lagado in the land of Laputa in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is such a place where 'the wise and the learned' communicate in objects instead of words; see the Appendix

become more elusive, appropriating the characteristics of a new culture of rights to something. Business will try to cultivate it by branding it and will end up pushing identities into the reckless market. Again, the response will be characterised by a certain counter-culture and cultural fundamentalism, though they will slowly lose ground to entropy.

With the conceptualisation of both the world and the museum, the notion of “originality” is dispersing and becoming ever more relative. What is important is the authenticity, reliability and quality of information and the effectiveness of its presentation. An original can be important but it is not obligatory. As a result of this global orientation towards the original, one often forgets that the integral part of “originality” is its (rarely existing) context and its redundant modes of usage, which can sometimes even derive from fabricated meanings. These “processual”, conceptual and contextual aspects of “originality” are increasingly becoming important in the museum's discourse as they wish to communicate meanings and not just exhibit objects. Museums are not houses of objects but houses of ideas. Original objects will however, continue to be an attractive, comprehensive and, undeniably, a permanent source of information. In a world that fosters mass production on the one side, and perfect reproductive technologies on the other, the notion of the original is changing and is, consequently, considered less important than before.

### **Fetishism**

To touch, or even see, an original object that belonged to a particular great personality or came from a particular place or notorious historical event bears a

mythological, fetishist quality. Most of us still find it an enormous privilege and rare opportunity to be able to touch something that belonged to a legendary personality, be it a national hero or a famous film star. How it came about that we were drawn into this fascination is another matter, but whole museums were founded upon that fascination. Thus hats, pens, working tables, uniforms, and walking sticks... all matter of objects of personal use become priceless treasures which are highly attractive to the masses. It matters little that some objects, although they belonged to these people, were possibly disliked or even unused by them. People want to believe in them and superstitiously cling to fascination. Since this book was not composed to win approval, I will say that a conventional museum's disposal of objects and issuing expectations strongly recalls the liturgy in their supposed spiritual temples. In the end, both fail to communicate the essence. Museums betray wisdom, just as churches do spirituality. What they do achieve is an illusion, and that is where all the difficulties begin and creative solutions start. As Wisdom does not reside in most museums, God does not dwell in most temples. Perhaps he does not reside in any of them. There is a constant danger that any museum, understood as a spiritual home, can become a hypocritical institution, - a place where certain cultural rituals replace their spiritual duties. Again, just as churches close gods into their shrines, museums do the same with their wisdom. The point is probably to insist that both god and wisdom are kept ever present out there, outside the temples and among the people who need them.

"Objects form a collection, not a museum"<sup>99</sup>. That is to say, the museum is much more than just a collection. In this sense, objects are a means to a goal that extends beyond their significance. Still, in relatively recent times we might have heard that "preservation and the demands for public access are a contradiction lived out in any situation"<sup>100</sup>. In principle this may well be true, but isn't that a little like saying the maintenance of the roads and their use by drivers is a contradiction? If objects have to suffer for the public benefit, then that is why they are there.

### **Serving the unreliable senses**

Human beings are largely irrational and easily embarrassed by their perceptive capacity. Therefore they seek assurance from their senses, preferably through physical touch and sight. Paradoxically, just as the senses are used to produce magnificent artistic and scientific achievements, they are also easily deceived. In fact any illusionists or spin doctors can provide a myriad of examples.

### **Relativity of the original and material**

In any case, what is called an original does not necessarily have to be one, - for example the Romans made copies of the original Greek sculptures<sup>101</sup>. Furthermore, the real originals, before they became white, glittering and smoothly polished marbles were, as a rule, painted in bright colours. So the rightful question is; do we admire an original even if the

<sup>99</sup>Dana, John Cotton. *A Plan for a New Museum*. The Elm Tree Press: Woodstock, Vermont, 1920.

<sup>100</sup>AAM, 1984, Conference papers, but actually an assertion often heard.

<sup>101</sup>Originals and substitutes. ICOFOM Conference, Zagreb 1985.

Roman copy serves to recall its Greek predecessor? Or indeed, what is more original, a plaster cast of a Romanesque portal done in the 19th century, or the original portal in situ which has been damaged by one hundred odd years of pollution? Manet's famous painting "The Old Musician", was (for hundreds of years probably) another painting to that of the present one which emerged, bright and glittering, after a layer of darkening yellow varnish was finally removed. Generations evaluated him and honed their tastes upon the question of originality. The history of art abounds with the stories of that kind.



Museum collections were traditionally made up of originals and it was thought that a museum could offer its users only what was in the collection. That was very limiting to the possible scope of museum

communication. Once museums saw that the collection is there to serve their programme, it became obvious that museum communication shouldn't be limited by the contents and the size of the collection. The discourse is set according to the needs of the users, cooperation with other heritage institutions, creativeness and the availability of secondary material, whether it be copies, models or other media. A good collection is a welcome bonus, but should not prevent communicating decently conceived unity.

The original constitutes more than mere materiality because its power lies in its context; the surviving knowledge, an appreciation of it, and the right<sup>102</sup> to it, as specific self-memory. Ideas are superior to their expressions in matter, to their materialisation. Pictures in spirit and revelatory feelings are closer to intangible than tangible<sup>103</sup>. As we have previously mentioned, all heritage is intangible, only some is materialized.

### **Collection centred institutions**

"The basic guideline in the choice of objects we have put in our new permanent show was guided by this: it had to express the system and contents of our collections"<sup>104</sup>. Well, that is what museums do, don't they. So here let's direct our attention to a museum in a certain small city that displayed the best parts of its collections. They were the results of a group of enthusiasts from the 19th century; bequests from an

<sup>102</sup>A copy of a mask in Benin in its original setting derives its relevance from the right of place and inheritance, unlike the same copy in the context of an occidental museum.

<sup>103</sup>Raphael Mengs (1762), Woelflin, or Malraux would say the same, from what I retain.

<sup>104</sup>A director of a major national museum in Croatia in a text of the museum magazine, 1994., explaining the newly refurbished museum.

eccentric amateur entomologist, inherited collections, even a bachelor clerk in the local bank had "an antiquity" worth collecting. (By the way, he made his purchases wherever he was travelling and from anybody he was able to buy from). The world war passed and what was accumulated from abandoned homes and absent families ended up in museums. The Communist party installed a new director who was diligently collecting the arms from the revolutionary war. Finally, a late pub owner and proud peasant by birth developed a successful business and literally pillaged puzzled villagers. As a result, he amassed a collection that, after his death, was given, in part, to the museum. (The rest of the collection which was comprised with blind fascination and with no criteria at all, adorns the pub, or has since been sold by his descendants). Well, seven curators did add certain objects as they happened to come across them and only one made a firm effort to add some objects from the town's history. Alas, the time was a socialist recession, so his vision was in vain.

**Collections should reflect our mission**

**Why should the collections exist  
if they cannot remind us  
that 90 billion people have died so far on the Planet  
and that most of them wanted to learn  
what was wrong and disgraceful with human existence ???**

**Can public memory institutions teach us,  
this basic wisdom? Can they try?**

**If not taken as material for wisdom,  
Collections are not worth the effort and money.**

© Tomislav Šola, 2005



Let's imagine that the director at the beginning of this story is not an exception (as, in fact, he is not) and, therefore, how would his like-minded colleagues in the small town have conceived the refurbishment and renewal of his museum? In the very same way. He would present the collections. So this hap-hazard alluvium of the past, which has washed into the present, is supposed to tell the story of the city. The puzzle box is named after the city but it contains parts that will never compose a usable or recognizable picture. A documentary film would, a theatre drama would..., but not this museum. Museums are houses of ideas, objects and concepts which serve well to support the credibility and enrich the language of the museum.

The most important things in museums are time and values and neither of them are visible, palpable, stable or measurable. We are in a field that is far from being adept at the simple communication of supposedly important things which have been collected and then displayed, even if in an attractive way.

## **9. Hypermnesia, possessiveness, gigantism**

### **Possessiveness (and generosity)**

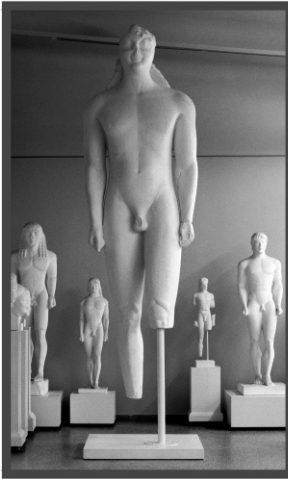
As a result of the assumption that a museum is better if it has a larger collection, museums are continuously growing and are becoming discouragingly huge. With every new expansion, they are growing beyond the measure of what an average visitor can absorb. They keep stretching out above and below ground and their increasing size is turning them into places where it is easy to get tired and lost. A possessive museum tries to collect as many pieces as possible because this quantitative perfectionism reduces the risk of overlooking or missing something important.

The nature of possessiveness is accustomed to inventing a great many justifications for desire to plunder other cultures (which is what much of museum history is composed of) or, more recently (when we are aware of it) for not returning property to the original owners, those who can only truly profit from it. However, this sin, including the abominable practice of looting graves in the interests of archaeology, has been seriously revised over last two decades. The return of human remains to their descendants for re-burial was an unthinkable practice two decades ago. Good, we are advancing towards a

real profession in which the fetishism of original is not an omnipotent argument for owning the physical object. An early example, back in the 1980s which fascinated me<sup>105</sup> was the decision of the National Museum of Denmark to return 200 watercolours in 1982, and then an ethnographic collection eight years later. This was just the beginning of a consistent flow of material being returned to its origins.

The world is going through a process of entropy and the feeling of being endangered is causing general “musealisation”. It is a sort of a Noah's reflex to try to

### Genius loci as the right to substitute



Statues from "hiera hodos" (sacred way) which was the link between the ancient city of Samos and the Heraion:

The sacred way at Samos is partly reconstructed. The replicas of the statues (from different museums' collections) are placed *in situ*, at the original site.

Originals in a museum in Germany

<sup>105</sup>This fascination brought me to accept the post of senior curator-adviser in that museum a decade later, a role I was unable to retain because of private reasons; one of the projects I wanted to do there was The Best in Heritage Conference ([www.TheBestInHeritage.com](http://www.TheBestInHeritage.com))

preserve from extinction everything that is considered valuable and important. Dislocated storerooms as far as tens of kilometres away from the central museum illustrate the need to put away as much material heritage as possible into the safety of museum storage. Larger and more numerous museums and fuller storehouses do not preserve disappearing values but simply push them to the limits of their physical growth. "Too many museum collections are underused not displayed, published, used for research or even understood by the institutions that care for them"<sup>106</sup>. The recent 2011 ICCROM report says: An estimated 60% of the world's collections in storage are inaccessible and deteriorating rapidly<sup>107</sup>. The sheer size makes these gigantic museums difficult to visit and expensive to maintain<sup>108</sup> and the worsening fiscal conditions will make it only more obvious. Therefore, if big, the collection should at least circulate and be as much as possible on the move.



<sup>106</sup>Jane Glaister, former president of the MA

<sup>107</sup><http://museumstorage.questionpro.com/>

<sup>108</sup>Lord, Barry Dexter, Gail Nicks, John, The cost of collecting, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Service, 1989

Compulsive collecting has been challenged in the past decades by the economic reality: it became clear that no matter what part of a heritage institutions working process we take into consideration, we are immediately faced with issuing financial implications. Any decision has, at one stage of its life, palpable financial consequences. Once we put aside capital investment, probably the most obvious is, indeed, collecting. Why did we ever need a theory? Because, only theory provides wider insight and deduction from practice, and can inform the parameters of what to collect. The art of selection is a type of wisdom so why shouldn't it be the same for museums. But in order to select, one has to have criteria (important-unimportant) and clear vision what to do and for whom<sup>109</sup>.

The possessiveness of museums and other heritage institutions is easily discernable by their reluctance to become a united network of heritage resources that may afford unique interpretative and communicational potential. "My museum" and "my collection" are still terms that are very much in use in the curatorial vocabulary. This explains why in one central European city there are two museums within walking distance one from another that each has parts of the same object: one keeps the lower part of the altar and the other holds the upper piece. Of course, the altar makes sense only as a whole. The alleged sacredness of the inventory book is the only conclusive record of it that exists. In fact, it is symbol of the feeble

<sup>109</sup>We hardly need a better start for any theory, - so much about those who still think that mere practice suffices in resolving these dilemmas.

understanding of the mission of public heritage. There is the case of two museums in another city<sup>110</sup> in which one museum has the left shoe and the other possesses the right one. Be that important or not, it shows their failure to regard themselves as members of the same, unified network. We do live in a world where Swift's irony would not be displaced. In a West-European city, two ethnic communities divided their library by the awkward logic of a catalogue: one took the part until the letter "L" and the other the part from "L" onwards.

### **Hypermnesia**

Because of extensive collecting, museums function as growing collective memory, as a quantitative extension for the brain's capacity. However, selectivity has often been shunned as too delicate a task. The need to increase a collection in order to "remember" more is the sort of institutional hypermnesia that reflects the inability to remember by the noble art of forgetting, and to document by selecting responsibly. Collective memory institutions are a sort of collective, mega brain, - an achievement that, in a material sense, competes with the swelling Internet. But quantity never meant implicitly that it would become a quality. "A great memory does not make a mind any more than a dictionary is a piece of literature"<sup>111</sup>.

Museums suffer from information gluttony. And it shows. They are a complex media, and aside from the exhibits, there is often too much text and information on display. To burden viewers with information

<sup>110</sup>Manchester, UK

<sup>111</sup>John Henry Newman, an important figure in the religious history of England during the 19th century. He was known nationally by the mid-1830s.

**The constant call for more knowledge  
may be the result  
of embarrassment or manipulation.  
Or it may just be a sickness: Hypermnesia.  
(Remember The Rainman?)  
No knowledge can be made a priority.  
What we need is wisdom,  
- A Society of wisdom.**

© Tomislav Šola, 2007

overload turns people off and makes it impossible to communicate clearly and efficiently. Only the drama of theatres and films which provide perspective, hierarchical structure and movement when applied to the museum's discourse can ensure an effective transfer of the experience. As specific theatrical media, museums should not become a three-dimensional school textbook: they have to stimulate thought, incite surprise and create emotional and intellectual impulses. A number of museums are flawed by the over-use of texts and diagrams. Often they deliver an amount of information that no visitor would be able to digest during the reasonable span of a visit. Still too many museums believe that they have to exhibit as many objects as they can afford to and deliver as much information as they can force into the captions. Many however, came to understand that less may indeed be more, if it is shaped by a well-developed strategy.

Hypermnesia, which is characterized by a lack of criteria and automaticity, is not implicit in museums

because, like all heritage institutions, they choose approaches that toy with celebratory intentions and institutionalized amnesia. In both, choosing what to celebrate or what to forget introduces an affective tone, no matter how motivated. Any motivation is an expression of interest, so it pays to continually analyse the position of heritage and its institutions in society. Therefore, it's only natural that heritage tourism or tourism in general, will influence its entire working process: what to collect, what to study and what to communicate. As times change, politics and changing mind sets constantly leave their footprint.

### **Gigantism**

The greed of the collector has been inherited by museums, as they bear many examples of individual possessiveness. No museum curator is ready to admit that his or her collection is big enough or complete enough. It might be as far as documenting and presenting certain phenomenon is concerned, if the aim is communicating the contents of the collection. But, the rules are usually derived from the logic of scientific perfection, which equates to "the more objects the better". This mind-set can ultimately protect collections from errors and shortcomings or can, indeed, provide a larger basis for future research. Even that is questionable though, as it does not relieve curators from the task of difficult and responsible selection. This is because the irreversibly lost past itself (that the collection is documenting), was *the* perfect but lost collection. It may well be that the objective of wisdom is to understand what we are about and what we do not dare to address.



TO ATTAIN KNOWLEDGE,  
ADD THINGS EVERY DAY.  
TO ATTAIN WISDOM,  
REMOVE THINGS EVERY DAY.

Lao Tse

OMNE NIMIUM NOCET  
All that is superfluous is harmful

A Latin proverb

Huge, gigantic museums are also scary simply because of the immensity of the task they represent for any visitor. They may also breed character flaws such as induced insincerity, for one. People who willingly run 15 kilometres throughout The Louvre (or at least for as many as they can on their feet) and then say they have enjoyed the visit are very likely to fib about other possible comforts and advantages as well. Adversely, pleasure in the company of art is a noble and precious experience. A gigantic museum can, in terms of its organisation, management and corporate culture, become clumsy, careless and inattentive, in a word, -unintelligent. The smart and succinct organisations are usually smaller and have an easily manageable, versatile nature. They are the future.

Museums mostly grow without any regard for their final users. There are too many simply enormous, gigantic museums. They are practically impossible to visit; they discourage and frustrate their visitors and prove to be quite challenging. In the case of the small number of encyclopaedic museums in the world, this argument, naturally, can hardly be applied because, by definition, their function is exceptional.

## 10. Hyperactivity and superlativeness

### Hyperactivity

Museums are often under pressure from politicians, sponsors and competitors and they feel they should have, in addition to their permanent exhibitions, several new programs running simultaneously: blockbuster exhibitions, travelling exhibitions, study exhibitions, workshops, concerts, receptions, festivals and so on. It is often the case, especially with American museums, that on account of this business orientation, the basic responsibilities such as collecting, research and collections care are neglected. Therefore it's important to adequately define a museum's product and its quality, so that the museum's activity is not determined by quantity or by an effort to flatter stakeholders. There is an optimal, quality balance of potentials and performance that has to be achieved to maintain professional excellence.

Though many museums nowadays are moving past old practices, many still get trapped by the conventional, popular notions of what a museum should be, so they usually exhibit the oldest, biggest, smallest, most important, most expensive and most rare objects in their collection. Although they may be interesting, these objects cannot explain the nature of the world, or a particular identity or phenomenon.

This sensationalism in museums was responsible for the practice of mega exhibitions built from media induced themes; often great painters or specific themes<sup>112</sup>. The crowds they attracted hardly made them worth a visit, as it was impossible to avoid the rolling torrent of visitors who were there because it was a 'must see' event. The objection to the quality of their visit is not false, as it was poor, but it did have a certain impact; glorious and doubtful at the same time, like the visits realized in the "night of museums", or on "International Museum Day". However magnificent a sight, this brings numbers and inadequate levels of quality to the forefront. These sorts of occasions seem to be a perfect opportunity to push the heritage institutions' offer a place or two higher on the scale of public values.

In the words of P. de Montebello, a former director of the Metropolitan museum, the "museum is competing with its own self" and concerning itself with "a deluge of hectic activities" roused by incessant competition with the performing arts and other media. This American situation is having its mirror image in Europe. The hyperactivity is a malaise, and can hurt some basic, behind-the-scene parts of the museum process that are less visible or indeed (one may wonder why) entirely hidden, and yet, it is as important to communication as the exhibition component. In the States and in Canada, often it's the director playing the part of the proverbial "sandwich man" as they have to maintain rising levels of activity

<sup>112</sup>With blockbusters like Van Gogh, Pissaro, Picasso, Warhol and mega-shows like Tutankhamen and the like, this practice is becoming a big business largely out of the control of museums because they are dictated to by city governments, politicians, tourism and other business corporations.

and probable increases in visitor numbers (in an effort to try and satisfy the Board). Many of our colleagues work like galley slaves. The irony of it is that not all block-busters were worth the pain, nor would an incessant activity like acquiring positive effects in the community necessarily be. Needless to say, the former socialist countries retained scarcely imaginably high numbers of staff, often with equally surprising inefficiency and, though probably paid less (which is only relative to their social environment), have many benefits that their occidental colleagues cannot have<sup>113</sup>.

### **The superlativeness**

Museums and other heritage institutions have only recently started to become concerned with a complex, multidisciplinary approach, which is not only providing good insight into a certain phenomenon, but is to some extent, important for the promotion of culture and of memory in general, for the purposes of (good) education. Specifically, that it is not only representative but also representational<sup>114</sup>: what is important by the usual superlative measures may not be important for a certain theme or phenomenon. Collecting *trivialia* leads to collecting objects with no obvious value aside from documentary, contextual and *quotidiana* significance, - objects from everyday reality. They were used by common people in the early 1980s and reflected a great change of paradigm. This was the time in which many museums finally realized that they were meant to tell the stories through which

<sup>113</sup>Cars with drivers, directorship with endless, only a formal mandate, free hands in finances etc.

<sup>114</sup>I wrote an article upon this difference back in 1984 in the magazine "Naše teme", Zagreb.

people could recognize their own destiny and their own lives. The superlatives simultaneously reiterated the discovery of the present: its needs, its protagonists and the recent past which did not require any historic distance to be taken seriously. However, it still appears to many, as a consequence of the previous practices and prevailing character of museum collections, that heritage or culture only counts when it is sensationalised enough to testify to greatness and glory, a sort of Guinness Book syndrome.

Being untrained for the demands of the profession, and faced with increasing competition, shrinking budgets and rising demands from key stakeholders for public and media relevance, - heritage institutions, and most likely museums, may find themselves in an awkward race with their competitors which, by way of their own popularity, are not bound by any professional or scientific scruples. Excessive activity and favouring the public mass will never be the way<sup>115</sup>. Museums must differ because it's only through difference that they have a chance, or offer one to their users. If they achieve a million or, as it is the case with the biggest of them, eight million visitors a year, museums will do well to ask the question: have we succeeded to make at least 10% of them better, more noble and virtuous than they were before entering our premises? If that works for rock concerts why shouldn't it for museums? In fact, I think it does but that should be part of the plan.

<sup>115</sup>The Road to Wigan Pier is a book by the British writer George Orwell, first published in 1937. The first half of this work documents his sociological investigations of the bleak living conditions amongst the working classes in Lancashire and Yorkshire in the industrial north of England before World War II. The Place has been turned into a visitor attraction, the 'Way We Were' Museum, ignoring the spirit of the place by turning it into a nice story. It closed to the public however, in December 2007 and a new attempt is already in planning and will hopefully show that the truth, however it is interpreted, is the only guarantee of longevity of our endeavours.

## 11. Hyper-realism

Museums show more than reality. This can make their discourse more expressive, but it can also provide false information: eyelevel exhibits of sculptures taken from a cathedral's façade (tens of metres high), a daylight show of the creatures whose life cycles pass in complete darkness. These are illuminations that authors or original users could not have experienced nor imagined. Hyper-realistic techniques can be a way of expressing, but not informing, that which was distant, unreachable, hidden or considered taboo, and has to be interpreted as such. Audiovisual media can often reveal dimensions and characteristics of objects that would otherwise be invisible. This can create an image of distorted reality: many works of art were not made for mass consumption, graves were not meant to be open, the lights were not meant to show the details of texture or techniques, etc. In brief, we are offered sights and insights which, although they can be taken as a part of interpretation and explanation, can blur the notion of reality as a result of these changes. An average, urban visitor would find it difficult to imagine darkness or silence, for instance. Owing to the scarcity and simplicity of life's practices in preceding times, our notion of times past is all too often romanticized, extracted, plucked out of context, or

socially biased and distorted, much like it is distorted in films though in a more explicit (but also more attractive) way. We see in museums what could not have been seen in reality, or we see it in a way that it was never meant to be appreciated. We know that it impacts on practice, but it may also lead to the realization that museum should be taken as a creative medium, complete with its own capacities and risks. And thus, we may resolve the tricky assumption around objective visual language they are pursuing.

## 12. Imago mortis and entropy

In the 1960s, museums were regarded as the epitome of the establishment and there came a symbolic revolutionary suggestion that they should be erased. Some perhaps lacked imagination in thinking that the only way to erase oppression was by demolishing its symbolic sites. They were taken as venues where "the dead" assisted in "corrupt the living"<sup>116</sup>. The irony is that museums started as places of wonderment, play and curiosity, often flirting with the bizarre and unique. Nowadays, they are taken (for the most part) to be serious and gloomy. As people, groups and communities, we reflect both a picture of life and a commitment to its values, or conversely, an image of death and decay. It matters little at the end of the day how obvious this is, or, ultimately, whether it appears visible at all. Our institutions are very much the picture of our individual or collective ambitions and therefore they reflect the character of their owners. The reasons for this disorderly state and the lack of an optimistic tone or harmony between mind sets and values are numerous. There will be very few museums that could be classified as representative of optimism and joy,

<sup>116</sup>Maurice Barres, French writer



even if they seek to do it in some well measured way, like the proverbial philosophers. Most of them, regardless of whether we are culturally conditioned not to see this fact, are gloomy, awkward, peculiar places that a hypothetical, idealized visitor from another spiritual dimension of the universe would not understand at all. An ideal spirit expecting the eros of entrepreneurial devotion in the public mission would still be largely disappointed too.

### **Imago mortis**

Most traditional museums seem more like mortuaries or intensive care units; they store mummified material remains from a former life. They resemble "morgues, cemeteries, hypogea"<sup>17</sup>. In other words, they are places where material is preserved after the event of its social and cultural death. It seems that in the process of musealisation museums have been freezing everything they touched: that which a museum deems valuable or that which it exhibits is usually dead or in the process of dying (just as Medusa turned everything she looked at into stone). Reformed museums demonstrate that they do not need to be, since a museum has to enable identities to stay alive. Museums take from life only to give back. But if they fail, what was formerly living - the values belonging to a certain sense of identity - are reduced to a set of institutionalized knowledge and scientific methods capable only of reflecting it. But the same happens with all the values, those in popular medicine say.

<sup>17</sup>This strong criticism of museums belongs to Salomon Reinach, an archaeologist and curator living and active in the first three decades of 20th century....Hypogea is plural for a Pre-Christian underground tomb;

"What once represented popular knowledge nowadays is a set of techniques"<sup>118</sup>. The traditional *sagesse* was absorbed by the industries.

Most of the major museums show only a small percentage of their collections, the rest are doomed to remain in the eternal darkness of storerooms. The process of musealisation has significantly, or completely, paralysed their identities. In museums of technique or technology, one might have concluded on numerous occasions that the curators collect old, useless machines, only to put them into crowded storage facilities. The rare ones that are displayed are more often than not completely devoid of life, - there are no engineers or workers around, smell and noise are lacking, they are useless and not expected to do anything except look nicely painted and polished on the marble floor. They look like embalmed carcasses: effigies to some aspect of real life that has gone forever.

It is rather paradoxical and illogical that museum naturalists kill animals, perform taxidermy, stuff them and then take great pride in showing how they looked when they were alive. The life-time prison for animals - the zoo - is now, at least in the West, obliged to follow certain standards regarding the imprisonment of these animals. With this abundance of media and computer simulation technology, all zoos should be abandoned by decree and the money sent to the reserves where, although the animals are endangered and insufficiently maintained, they still have a chance.

<sup>118</sup>Proust, Marcel. *Le Temps Retrouve*, No 78, juin, 1993.

Taxidermy should be left to the history of museums too.

For some sixty years, one of the first objects a visitor would come across in one of the most legendary and highly important museums in the world, Musée de l'Homme, was the dried, mummified foot of a young Chinese female. *Chánzú*, the traditional custom performed on young girls and women. In China this ritual was practiced for approximately one thousand years, despite resulting in horrific deformations, in order to fulfill the desire for very small feet. Showing the amputated foot of a once living person can hardly be a civilized act. There are corpses in museums all over the world: Lindow man (and woman), Oetzi<sup>119</sup>, Tollund Man, Clonycavan Man, Grauballe Man, Old Croghan Man, Weerdinge men, Windeby I, Yde Girl, all the Egyptian and south American mummies, Pompeian burnt and petrified citizens, and tens of thousands of others, some still retaining their real names, while others are anonymous. Or, are they indeed?

“Oetzi” is a victim of wounds from a fight, it seems, and has been found where he died trying to find the shelter and cure. But, who has a right to exhume the body of a person already given over to the gods, eternity, peace, - whatever the expectation was according to a certain culture? To find and leave, research and give back, see and give over - yes. But to remove and deliver to the crown, no one has that right. The only "right" is that of supremacy sized up in the

<sup>119</sup><http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:OetzitheIceman02.jpg> . The photo shown:  
© South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology



Ötzi mummy, 4000BC

name of science, i.e. our notion of what science is: another inconsiderate conquest. How close in time does scientific interest extend? Would we allow our own ancestors to be exhumed? Or even our grandparents? Can kings of the present dynasties also be excavated from their eternal resting sites? Or is it all just a matter of having relatives or powerful protectors who ban scientific curiosity? Who makes the rules? Is heritage ethics finally strong enough to make clear scope or criteria?

Therefore, the *dance macabre* of many western museums is not an obvious blasphemy only because we take conventional museums as part of our culture and leave their peculiar practices unquestioned.

The recent practice of returning human remains to their cultures of origin for re-burial<sup>120</sup> is at least a sign that ethics are entering heritage institutions in real way, and not only as a code of professional conduct, as

<sup>120</sup>Museum international; LXI(61), 1-2 / 241-242, 2009



Collection of mummies, Istria, Croatia

has been the case to date. This chapter of the professionalism agenda for public memory institutions is only one among many to be re-examined. Why would we insist upon being so different from so called primitive societies who live with their ancestors (like on Vanuatu), when it still occurs in our own museums. See the stuffed Jeremy Bentham jurist, philosopher at University College of London entrance hall. Well, of course, bizarre examples may well indicate that we have subdued this inconvenient destiny to others, but that only reflects badly on us. On the other hand, is it not true that most of what we expose in our museums are relics and remnants of some vanished form of life, of vanquished times and people? If we could only imagine a type of being who is totally innocent of our cultural experiences, our myths and world views, - a free spiritual being, and then we could surmise that such a being would be rather astonished by our primitive notions of eternity and "keeping" memories alive. It would do so through criteria, by way of an ethical concern and curiosity toward the criteria of importance that we assign to different objects.

As modern museums have proved unable to transcend their own institutions, they are equally unable to transcend the past itself, and are facing their final objective. Having tried to act like a scientific institute, most of the museum's job comprises of an analysis of the past without synthesis in comparisons with the present. This is why the museum is essentially artificial (which is not a sin if we could talk about its creative language) and ex-temporal (which, again, is not a sin if it leads to the communication of an adequate message and degree of universal wisdom). If museums do not succeed in becoming a means of hope, if they do not enchant us with the light of cognition, with a new sensitivity for the environment in its spatial and temporal dimensions, - if they cannot do that, - they remain an eschatological metaphor, a formalized, *scientificized* necrophilic endeavour.

If you see life in a museum, you must indeed be facing a window. Well, happily enough this statement was part of my lectures a long time ago. Let us now say that whenever life dwells in a museum, with all its questions, emotions, frustrations, needs and (can your professionalism reach this far) joy (without being shallow), you are doing nicely. That would be one of the indicators of a job well done. Instead of showing the image of death, only a step further, but a crucial step at that, - is using it to tell the story about us. We are the future *them*. Some objects we are using, and parts of the environment itself which make up the visible, palpable and audible structure of our living culture can, and probably will, end up in museums. How will our descendants describe us? Well, firstly, we always smile when we are photographed, so imagine the rest of the ambition. But that right is theirs. Our right is to

see ourselves in our ancestors so that by learning about death we gain the correct arguments we require to love life. Heritage institutions have the serious and important task of teaching people the art of stepping down. The "ars moriendi" would be a task worth the mission. By showing death and disintegration as a sort of necrophilic exercise while superficially trying to rationalize the fear of it, they only sink us deeper into the despair and do not contribute to the joy of living (which is what museums should ultimately be about). As a science, heritage is unfinished business, heritage as nostalgia is harmful beautification and heritage as foolish amusement disdains the past and belittles our ancestors. Yet, whoever makes a big farce and mockery of human weaknesses and the human imperfection of society does best. But, only those who do it by retaining scientific responsibility earn the title of a professional, a museum curator (for instance) rather than just being an employee of a museum.

### **The questionable ethics of grave obstruction**

Museums often exhibit human and animal remains in a way that insults their dignity, unless the criteria are set by the museum tradition itself. Archaeologists became very offended twenty years ago when questions were raised around their practice of digging up honest people's graves, displacing their remains in the museum and, eventually, exposing their bones and other goods from their graves to the eyes of the world. They have been passed over to eternity and the gods in a ceremony that was an ultimate and final act and never intended to be reversed or disturbed. Why are some important graves still intact? Because their lineage still survives they are protected by their decedents. So does

that mean we can only pillage the graves of those who are not protected? Who granted us this power? Well, science obviously, but couldn't there have been more of a compromise?



Metropolitan  
Museum of Art,  
2006:  
"Sunday is the last  
chance to see the  
Euphronios krater  
at the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art", as  
it went back to Italy  
where it belonged.

The return of property can result in a satisfactory outcome for both sides<sup>121</sup>



Yale University has agreed to return thousands of Inca relics to Peru that were excavated at Machu Picchu. (Images courtesy of Yale Peabody Museum)



The relics were excavated from 1911-15 by a Yale history professor, Hiram Bingham.

<sup>121</sup>[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/e/euphronios\\_krater/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/e/euphronios_krater/index.html)



Why would ethnologists pillage endangered rural or primitive cultures, bring their belongings to their museums and institutes and then breathe a sigh of relief believing they had saved those cultures! Perhaps it was the result of total obliviousness, or because of its physical nature maybe, but the point is to save the culture itself. Instead of taking things away, the first advanced reaction was to create a museum in situ. But curators did not realize that a conventional museum is like a cenotaph to the culture it protects. Conventional museums behave like large mowers leaving behind lots of grass while the field behind is left without sounds, smells, and creatures that made their habitat there.

The new response, founded upon the new theory and practice of eco-museums, would attempt to breathe life back in and resuscitate the dying heart of the culture like a pace-maker. No, it is not an arrangement celebrating its death, or an artificial apparatus that would take its place, but in fact, a set of life saving impulses directed at its true heart. Easier said than done. Quite right.

### **Entropy**

By collecting, enlarging and expanding their often enormous collections, museums become part of those human activities that impoverish the living fabric of identity, whatever it may be. A curator-zoologist would find himself in that position whenever he obtains an animal for taxidermy, or in the case of a curator-ethnologist, when he visits villages in search of objects from rural cultures. Hundreds of museums and thousands of curators make this problem an obvious one. They contribute to the degradation of a

living or disappearing identity. Museum storage facilities or, more rarely, exhibition halls, appear to be the legitimate conclusion to their professional efforts. But with this assumption, museums unintentionally suggest that their work in conservation is complete, while in reality, they actually contribute to the further degradation of that which they are supposed to protect.

The art museums' curators tend to strip the ambience of the artists' studios and private homes where the art was either created or originally placed. The so acquired art works they take to these peculiar palaces where the artefacts are "hung" on whitewashed walls. They are secured by alarms, pinned to the background by the piercing spotlights in an air-conditioned, antiseptic environment. Where is the life that made up and essential part of it?

Would it be too harsh to say that only extinct cultures support conventional, traditional museums? Living

### The lost intimacy of artworks



cultures do, in fact, need museums, or heritage action, even an institutionalized one, but not those which would "musealize" them. When a certain identity makes its way into a (conventional) museum, it's a fairly reliable sign that the museum has become a part of its viability, or in the worst case, its replacement. The traditional museum is an art form in embryonic state; it is itself a metaphor of some identity that it is assigned or dedicated to, far removed from life and diverted away from it. Whenever museums become a way (one of many) of consciously and intentionally managing the world, they become part of the very world living around them. But they have often impoverished heritage at its source, *in situ*, and also hopelessly institutionalized the phenomenon of collecting by imposing standards on this impulse that discourage the natural individual "act of the museum".

## 13. Institutionalism

An institution, most dictionaries agree, is an establishment that has a formal governing instrument and a long term purpose. But, who guides them exactly and to what purpose remains a long story. Perhaps the first emanation of institutionalism is the conviction that we, public institutions are the most important, if not the only acting authorities, in the domain of heritage. Twenty years ago, depending upon the place, art historians would claim that heritage is art. In Greece, there were practically no other museums except for archaeological and some art museums. Heritage was archaeology. Not any more. Because heritage was archaeology. Following on from publicly accessible private collections, private museums are a rapidly growing novelty. So are the number of associations and individuals in the non-governmental, civic sector. Thus, heritage is being dispersed across many mediators and stakeholders, but their numbers and their proportional participation will vary.

Institutionalism is "characterized by blandness, drabness, uniformity and lack of individual attention attributed to large organizations that serve many

<sup>122</sup>Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary.

people: institutional food, institutional furniture"<sup>122</sup> ... or, we could add, institutional culture, knowledge, institutional memory, heritage, identity etc. Habermas calls institutions "the forms of the objective mind". Each of them functions in a plausible way as long as they embody their inherent idea. The moment he says that, its spirit deserts it; it is petrified into something mechanical, just like, he says, an organism without a soul that decomposes into dead matter"<sup>123</sup>. As I am unwilling to enter an old dispute, I would like to paraphrase Martin Luther, a professor of biblical exegesis, who said that the church was not a mediator between man and god, because god gives inner religiosity directly. Again, an institution is a means at best, - a facilitator, a moderator, a catalyst. The need for heritage and identity should be mostly excised from all heritage institutions. Communism was not destroyed by advantageous technologies or democracy, but by inertia, conservatism and a static and closed system that was doomed to fall apart.

### **Stability as being against change**

Institutionalism in post-historic society is turning into "perpetuum stabile", a sort of artificial position that pretends to guard against change. It is an ossification of ideals that were usually implied or explicit in the creation of the institution, or in a sort of selfish perversion of its objectives - an inward orientation towards self-sufficiency. It's possible this is why some are wary and fearful of change within the museum

<sup>123</sup>Habermas, Jurgen. The idea of the University: learning processes. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>124</sup>Duncan Ferguson Cameron. Getting out of our Skin: Museums and New Identity. Muse. Special Issue. Summer/Fall, 1992. Canadian Museum Association. p.8

establishment<sup>124</sup> and claim that "the museum institution has awesome inertia...The museum's social and political origins are its very foundations, and they all rally against change. Museum professionals have vested interests in the status quo"<sup>125</sup>. The *vis inertiae*, instead of *vis vitalis*. This reluctance to change or, indeed sudden *theatricality*, artificiality and excessive expressionism, is characteristic of the last phase of development of a number of values, whether they relate to art, politics or culture. The wider spectrum of museum and heritage institutional practices covers the entire breadth, depending on which country or culture we are concerned with. This is why any critical account, like this one for instance, will have implied difficulties in its reception: some institutions are extremely advanced while others are more backwards than the impression they give<sup>126</sup>.



© Tomislav Šola, University of Zagreb, 1989.

<sup>125</sup> Idem, p.7

<sup>126</sup> ...and yet, the criticism has meaning if universal, like the theoretical discipline it belongs to.

This is a rather logical outcome for institutions that have been taken as propagators of the past and its values; a task that encourages a conservative mentality. In fact, as in many other institutions, people often seek jobs as a form of self-realization. Traditionalists and conservatives are likely to be the most ready candidates for the positions within them because they prefer the past to the present and advocate resistance towards the future. So they promote permanence and security. They are illusions. Institutionalism that is resistant to change reflects a lack of credibility and courage, often claiming to be helpless and insignificant in the face of life's challenges. "Only by the constant testing new methods and new schemes can the museum of the present justify its existence"<sup>127</sup>.

**Too demanding an offer, exceeding the abilities of the user**

"The Louvre and the British museum are ridiculous museums", Kenneth Hudson stated on many occasions. It's a pity this great connoisseur of museums and heritage, this bright writer and artist of direct communication, is not here to explain his cynicism. It would have led to philosophical implications for Balzac's multi volume "The Human Comedy", and yet, owing to the depth of his insight, he could have been right. Oversized, demanding, founded on unattainable standards of knowledge and taste, striving for perfection and ultimately exhaustive, that is the image of inaptitude in our attempt to explain the world by any other means than

<sup>127</sup>Dana, John Cotton. A Plan for a New Museum. The Elm Tree Press: Woodstock, Vermont, 1920. p.4

in superlatives. The true concern of museums is referencing the world, and its aspirations, and is a fact perceived long ago by the sage of the museum world: "Yet, it is the development of relevance for which museums seek"<sup>128</sup>. Indeed, how will they construct their relevance in the world of today? What sort of stability do they have to offer in the fluid, and flux, that is reality that makes up the elusive nature of our own environment, and one which has descended into insecurity and temptation that we don't seem to be prepared for? With G. Pompidou and Giscard D Estaing, museums have become a political issue, following much of the practice of French kings. Any president is capable of leaving a public institution behind that will celebrate its patron after he is gone. Time for creation is hard to synchronize with political mandates so the curious occurrence in France is that "leftist" projects are finished by rightist politicians and vice versa. That may reflect the tacit agreement built upon the struggle towards eternity while differences are a secondary, public face. But, politicians or any other stakeholders will never stop at that: it is the programme, the anticipated output of museums that will always be their concern. It then remains the responsibility of well rounded, socially well behaved and power sensible curators to filter their decisions inside this self-imposed censorship<sup>129</sup>.

<sup>128</sup>Ripley, Dillon.S. The Sacred Grove: Essays on Museums, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969.p.92

<sup>129</sup>This censorship was often direct, sometimes out of control and ever subtle in so called communist or socialist countries, but that example never allowed them to see the sad truth of the West. Hypocrisy is well packed into democratic rhetoric. Once socialism is removed from the scene as the ugly alternative, this state will become worse.



## **Taking part in manipulation**

"Museums are products of the establishment and they authenticate the establishment, official values and image of a society, in several ways by directly promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternate values"<sup>130</sup>. There is a lot of induced misunderstanding towards the past. It is afflicted by cross curves, political or ethnic inhibition, tendentious interpretations and psychological tricks that lead to incorrect conclusions or that suggest non-existent truths. As such, the past has been rendered incomprehensible to many, and history repulsive to many others. No wonder this is at the root of the seductive conspiracy theories that have fuelled the information wars. Museums make up part of it, rather reluctantly and ineffectively, without the fervor of mercenaries or the efficiency of powerful shareholders. Known for their notorious auto-censorship, they often end up, at the very least through tacit consent, avoiding hot issues, or downplaying certain facts and events. This makes it possible to manipulate the present, - beyond being its formative part. The very orientation of the past, which is still pertinent to a majority of museums, is manipulative. Museums are about the present but use past as a means to serve it.

The reformed museum represents life, and therefore should be vital unto itself. In practice, institutions often forget the meaning and the purpose of their activity. It is a general problem in all branches of

<sup>130</sup>McLean, Fiona. *Marketing the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1997. p.30

society. It is there when politics ceases to be the art of mediation between different interests and becomes an imposition of power under the burden of institutionalism. This institutional forgetfulness is obvious when, instead of providing comfort and help, the church, for example, becomes a part of the process of domination over its people. It is the same sort of deviation as when schools corrupt their students socially and politically by stuffing them with specialist knowledge, instead of giving them broad views and a true education for understanding life and the meaning of freedom.

A museum burdened by institutionalism takes part in social, cultural and political manipulation instead of providing democratic insight in order to create an understanding of the world. Such a petrified institution is in no condition to make proper use of the opportunities that are made possible by marketing and new technologies. Museums turned into institutions because an institution enables ordered and standardized work. However institutionalism has brought about its fair share of "overacademics", who interpreted it as material evidence of science and not as public wisdom. "Every difficult period sees a proliferation of historical and ethnographical museums whose purpose is to smooth away worries about the future by extolling the values of the past"<sup>131</sup>.

Museums do have public credibility because they are understood to be non-profit by nature, and therefore disinterested in serving particular interests. What they

<sup>131</sup>Hubert, Francois. Ecomuseums in France: contradictions and distortions. Museum, UNESCO, Paris, vol. 27. No.4. 1985. p. 187

say counts and what they don't does too. This is a very important point because their future will depend upon their public perception. Will they prove that they can indeed heal themselves in time to provide solutions for the growing maladies of contemporary society? New professional excellence is already indicating the way.

Though still predominantly conservative, the museum community was willing to assume a curious definition of its role. The 1989 ICOM General Conference took the title "Museums as generators of culture". In brief, what they can do to a culture is to document it, research it, preserve it, communicate it, serve to interpret and amplify it, - and serve it. The only "culture" they can and should generate is the culture of visiting museums.

### **Bureaucratic attitudes - self-sufficiency and self-contingency**

All museums are reservoirs of knowledge and experience, some exceed expectations and some are simply enormous. What they usually offer is some disciplined, scientific product that functions best as an illustrative reminder for a scientist and much less as an experience that has been adapted to the lay person. Most heritage institutions will claim that they offer their utmost inside the confines of their given circumstances and conditions. However their mind set is simply stingy because they have either never learned, or gained through experience, that the only professional attitude that brings success is one of incessant and ready giving.

Most museum professionals do not identify or define their clients, nor are they able to understand whom they serve and why. They seem to be content with general statements which usually never include the

immediate community, the true owners of museum and those who need it most. Traditionalist museums like to believe that the secret of having visitors lies in educating people how to use conventional museums, instead of learning what they should be offering to the public in order to address their needs<sup>132</sup>. Still, too many museums like to measure their success by attendance figures and, only relatively recently, the profession has insisted on the quality of the visit as a measure of success. When they were self-sufficient and imposed upon the community by disregarding its needs, heritage institutions demonstrated a bureaucratic lack of compassion towards the needs of their citizens. The moment they make self-sufficiency their dominant characteristic they actually show how corrupt they are because this is clearly opposite of what any plausible mission would command. Often, implicitly, they move away from showing the programme, as they demonstrate how magnificent their institution is. The bureaucratic attitude is measured by the negative tendency of, in a manner of speaking, reducing "the space for cargo", which implies that the vehicle seems to be good enough if it is able to carry, or support, itself. This tendency can be easily detected at any time when a museum budget is barely exceeding salaries and overhead costs of so-called basic operation. Of course, in times of crisis scarcity may bring about similar consequences, but work must adapt to correspond to the possible programme. The bureaucratic mentality of an institution is reducing its

<sup>132</sup>Learning about the needs is not the same to following the wishes; the public may not be able to express their needs and there are multidisciplinary researches that are subtle ways to get to know them.

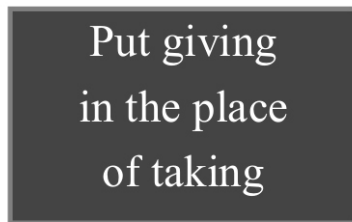
capacity for outreach by enforcing control and rigidity and turning towards tradition, conservative solutions and actively discouraging innovation and initiative. It quite often invents extremely complex solutions to assert rank and promotion (through hierarchies) as well as networking, collaboration or working procedures, which all stand in the place of simple and efficient professionalism (or hide the lack of it). Needless to say, we need the opposite of all of that: adjustable, versatile, quick to adapt to changing conditions in an increasingly fluid reality. Institutions may just be the only way to function in any organized system, and yet they are only viable when they are continually corrected and changed in accordance with the changing world around them, together with our increasingly clearer and more responsible view of their mission. We have a tendency to assign an ability to institutions to materialize our aspirations towards permanence and stability. But institutions are subject to all the processes of degradation and decadence when the memory of the healthy stimulus that created them is lost or too feeble to feed and inspire their function. If we just remember for a moment that many public institutions are created with the afterthought of serving certain particular interests of a group or a class, then these natural processes of decay (that can only be counteracted with constant renewal and re-thinking) are left to turn them into self-sufficient, hostile structures. What we have been afraid of for a century in SF literature, - owing to a fear of the danger and aggression of self-freed and wild cyborgs - has actually been occurring right throughout human history. Institutions themselves are supposed to be self-regulating human-machine systems which they

themselves can take over and subsequently terrorize their creators. We are increasingly going through this SF experience and hence our civil society, democracy development and hope that humanist ethics may one day enable us to control these mechanisms which were originally envisioned as a means of organizing our welfare and wellbeing.

### **The inability to deliver**

The main objective of any non-for-profit institution is to get a clear understanding of whom they ought to serve. But, not declaratively! That is the turning point that annihilates the commonplace "expertise driven" approach. Contrary to what may cross somebody's mind when reading this; it is a common fact that the most scientific and the very best curators are usually those who are able to explain their subject to any lay person. The problem arises when not so good curators try to explain their collection, or the set of messages it may contain, let alone the proverbial patriotism of Bureaucracy. It becomes a last refuge for the inaptitude of a corrupted mind, a sort of formula for those who cannot share and deliver because their appropriated mind set is geared towards taking, not giving.

The simple solution



Put giving  
in the place  
of taking

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Just as an ideology can lose its ideal to administrative tyranny, so institutions may forget the inspiration from which they derive. In the same ways that love can be lost in the formality of marriage, or eroticism in the technicality of *figurae veneris*. These formal institutions may behave more like crumpled individuals as they endeavor to hide their incompetence, past failures, repressed souls, troubled minds and personal trauma. Artists often become victims of institutionalisation. When Pushkin died tragically, Gogol was left the head of Russian literature. Having already written his best works by then, he had acclaimed unquestionable fame, and was installed in a luxury palace in Moscow. He became an institution; he felt like one and there began his irreversible decline. Many painters became institutions, products of the establishment, reproducing themselves and signing their paintings like cash cheques.



Professionals may be preventing the gain:  
a view, for instance



The architect hid this on purpose. Tell me why ?

Most professionals sincerely believe that they deliver what their public needs. General disinterest is put down to the "inertia and ignorance" of the public. Of course, marketing research was not conducted to prove otherwise. European museums that are mostly publicly financed should appropriate the American responsibility, referring to taxpayer's money. Unlike their US counterparts, they literally depend upon the concerned citizen.

**Institutions are needed, but they are always re-inventing themselves**

Just like the institutions themselves, mediators are part of any societal organisation, that's inevitable. When mediating diverse interests, we refer to politicians. In pursuing religious life, society calls on the priesthood. Looking to heritage, we have, among other occupations, the curators. They mediate between people and what their heritage is, but, arguably, is it



possible to establish fruitful relations without third party? Indeed, when it comes to knowing, understanding and safeguarding, modern people in the managed world need their institutions and their mediators for many purposes which a primitive society obviously would not comprehend. The future will clearly show that those entire heritage based occupation have to become helpers, collaborators, moderators and pilots for future users and their communities rather than the remote, self-contained entities who keep referring to "my museum" or "my collection". It is constant efforts towards de-institutionalisation that is the paradoxical aim of institutions<sup>133</sup>.

Self-revocation is the idealist objective of a profession: that people are healthy (needing no medical doctors), that everybody establishes a full spiritual life (discarding the need for priests) and that peace and justice reign (so that judges and juries become unnecessary). Being totally aware of one's own heritage requires the use and practise of it, as a source of wisdom that ensures a balanced identity. This kind of understanding of heritage would reduce the need for institutions. So giving back and handing over should be the primary professional goal in the pursuit of fulfilment. Unfortunately, the heritage domain is still trying hard to define its components and is not undertaking the definition on a large and all inclusive scale. It leads to ever renewing discussions around

<sup>133</sup>Hollywood gigantism and excessive merkantilism did so much harm to the film industry that their owners allowed them to form independent production units which produced low budget films that were closer to life and the original intentions of the industry.

what museums are and how should they be defined. The implicit and rather obvious claim is that many professionals in the domain of heritage cannot answer these questions, let alone those who show concern outside the field. Returning to the old dilemma is, seemingly, testament to embarrassment and the lack of a pro-active approach: technology and its generic consequences have made it clear that old shells are empty, as the old Chinese proverb goes. And so, the endless deliberation regarding the definition of this same institutional phenomenon will never yield solutions to dynamic challenges<sup>134</sup>. The essence of museums, let alone their derivations and hybrids, has not sufficiently been brought into professional consciousness, and certainly not to its citizens. One has a right to be concerned whether, indeed, heritage institutions could, in the long run, bear the competition. For their continued and successful existence, they need to fight the drawbacks of their (lack of) professionalism, of the troublesome legacies owing to former decisions (like packed, crowded and expensive storage facilities) and the calamities in the world that increase the demands on them for financial viability and independence from the state. Complacency is common at the top or from the best but they should never cease to perfect themselves. It is complacency and self-satisfaction coming from conventional institutions that continues to be the problem. "Institutions are appropriate structures for

<sup>134</sup>Davis, Ann; Mairesse, François; Desvallées, André. What is a Museum? München : Verlag Dr. Christian Müller-Straten ; ICOFOM, 2010. This valuable book, translated from the French original four years ago demonstrates that in those years the profession, internationally, did not provide better knowledge on the subject.

the continuation of a tradition, but they are not appropriate forms for the creation of the new or the revitalisation of the old<sup>135</sup>". I have all the reasons I need to believe that this respectable colleague has implied that museums do take part in the new and should do so. They are about change, not, as it seems, about reliving the past. The dying hearts of our culture(s) are constantly being replaced by massive museum apparatuses. This is another, dangerous disguise for the perverted technological genius of men: intervening into the living body at any cost, a cure for a bad consciousness. It is proof of an inability to continue the idealist endeavours of the human race; evidence of stalling and stupor in front of an ever more vital need for change. The need for answers is becoming dramatically urgent, though they are always the same: how do we stabilise the human cause in its steady advancement towards accumulated and yet inaccessible wisdom. All public institutions have an inbuilt frailty that could see them turn into the institutions of power that would inevitably lead to *d e g r a d a t i o n a n d d e c a d e n c e*. Once "establishmentarianism" is overcome by the profit orientation, it may indeed become a lost cause. Similarly, no true remedy can last if it is profit oriented, just as no law can guarantee justice if judgement is profit driven.

The institution is not an achievement in itself, and certainly not an objective, but rather a means towards set of goals. Sailing a ship or just keeping it in the

<sup>135</sup>Thompson, William Irvin. *Evil and World Order*. Harper & Row Publishers. 1976.p.10

harbour is not a reasonable exercise; even when it is performed as a leisure activity it is pragmatic. If it serves only pragmatic objectives it becomes confined to these goals and the changes they cause. The failures of different political parties, corporations and sectors can often be attributed to having been paralysed by institutionalism and limited by a self-created framework. Everything in the heritage sector can be constantly re-ordered and re-invented, creating new and refreshed definitions. Collections are not the past but only symbolic representations of it. Objects are hardly knowledge and they are certainly not wisdom. And, besides, are museums really about the past at all? The past itself is just a vehicle. They are about change, - changes to value systems, and to the ways we continue what we have identified as being worthwhile. Therefore, the quality of the heritage service is proportional to the extent of its constant de-institutionalisation.

One of the fundamental mistakes that occurs in both the theory and practice of heritage institutions is that institutions are taken as starting points. That is why we had, in the case of museums, a century long occlusion with museology<sup>136</sup>. The concepts and processes should have been starting points so that the institution would stay a mere consequence, opening the gates to many subsequent changes as time went on and conditions changed. In this instance, museums would not have become an obligatory medium for all situations, times or cultures.

<sup>136</sup>It is apparently rather similar to Library science and archival science; neither can claim the status of science; of course, there is no harm in that, as those who are challenged would claim.

## 14. Imperfect users

### The culture of using heritage

The act of visiting a museum has never been dependent on the culture of visiting, itself becoming more “professional”. For instance, many members of the public (i.e. museum goers) assume that museums ought to be solemn institutions that have a certain implicit right to be boring. That is wrong. Users are not perfect. Audiences are often more conservative than curators because they are conditioned by their education and they do not keep track of the developments in the field. Their prejudices, convictions, superficiality, etc., are all a part of the problems in communication.



The more subtle messages in this museum dealing with Nazi history were nevertheless too much for a preconditioned mind

If something is obsolete and discarded, people tend to respond with the suggestion that it "go to a museum". The popular and prevailing notion of a museum is still that of an irrelevant place where old things are stored and shown. Most of the population is docile, obedient and easily managed by those in the positions of power, especially if they have been prepped by the media. Only some parts of heritage, when its value is sensationalised by the fame of its owners, its uniqueness, the terror it produces or the degree to which it is worshipped stays as reliable, objective and useful. In summary, the masses will readily accept what is enough of a sensation to get their attention. They are always subject to the powers of manipulation which are at work in society, and as such, they are implicit in its function. This is how blockbusters came into fashion and how the incorrect assumption came about that anything less than a blockbuster was less valuable and less interesting. Moreover, a development such as the blockbuster came about through the gradual realisation that culture can be turned into a marketable commodity. Of course, the world changes, but the bigger the challenge, the greater the need to find viable solutions that do not compromise our mission. Like any other domain, we need our own experts desperately, because only they can weigh up the arguments for us; not marketing personnel, not experts from the tourism industry, not politicians and certainly not modern business people<sup>137</sup>.

<sup>137</sup>One should call them profit makers instead, because business, at least in the bright pages of its history, claimed certain morals and social responsibilities. At its best, business was developed by devoted individuals who saw a certain challenge for their dreams and creativity in a particular trade. The money followed their success. Mere precipitation after profit is as dishonorable as theft; merely legalizing and socially legitimizing it.

## **Public, visitors and non-goers**

Alas, our public is part of our former selves: they want splendour, - the best possible image of our projected "selves", but is that correct? Such institutions seem to be tautological tools for maintaining respect for power and *mutatis mutandis* of our time too. In questionnaires, museum visitors usually provide answers that reflect their benevolent dispositions towards the institution, which means that they give praise easily. In most cases, visitors are not concerned about museums in the way that curators would prefer. The visitors' books at almost any museum are symbolic of a willingness by the curatorial body to listen to public opinion, and yet most of their contents contain meaningless scribble or uncritical praise. Though the core percentage of the (conventional) public is very conservative, the larger body of visitors is highly susceptible to attractive simplifications and sensationalism. The intermediary portion of convinced museum users still reflects the minority. Therefore, any visitor research that is performed in heritage institutions is baseless: it reflects the prevalent attitudes of a faithful, conservative public of blockbuster and "museum night" visitors. To them museums are, and should remain, places for (useless) things that are in some way unique: by their scarcity, the reputation or importance of the former owner, by their material value, by their extraordinary or rare characteristics, - in short, any museum is first of all a collection of superlatives. In later years, the museum is at its best when exhibitions become a sensation in the media (Museums are often far from good for tourists but they are positively conditioned and mostly too hasty and too benevolent). Research should be

done outside museums where reality (that should be present in museums) is and where the non-goers are. That is the touchstone of quality.

### **Conservative, elitist expectations**

Part of the problem of the necessary role of eco-museums is still the reticence of the population, however paradoxical that might sound. Eco-museums were, namely, the first museums to include the population not only into their philosophy but in their management and planning also. Those more established people within the population, often the local politicians, were keen to have representative museums that would convey the most favourable and convincing version of the local identity, using the best objects they could find. It is often difficult to explain the most obvious issue: that the museum is about a particular identity and that the promotion of imported objects and values, or simply exhibiting the influences of the high classes, helps little in preserving what is local and specific and what, say, any tourist would appreciate. Now, with globalisation being counterbalanced by what some authors call "fragmentation", local stories finally have more of a chance to be heard. Unfortunately, valuable time and cultural substance have already been lost to decades of unsuccessful arguments relating to both theory and practice.

The struggle for a "high" culture and a more conducive image can be very counter-productive and lead to a nostalgic longing for times past, which is a kitsch attitude towards reality. It may represent a sort of refusal of reality, or a denial of its demands or challenges. It is believed that nostalgia was first



mentioned in 1756<sup>138</sup> which, if that is true, indicates that its appearance coincides with the Industrial revolution. During those years, a wave of changes hit the developed world and, seemingly, the most effective way to express regret was to invent a word that described "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition"<sup>139</sup>. In fact it is the refusal of reality which is deemed unacceptable or unworthy. The 'medievalisation' of contemporary society imposes the authority of business and media moguls and, in many countries, religious institutions, and renders people helpless, after having been confronted with so much manipulation and coercion. The 'Massification' of what was seen thirty or forty years ago as a community of free individuals, caused a social involution in which society defined its aspirations based on the lower level, rather than the higher one. Although we see an increase in new museum visiting<sup>140</sup>, it would be difficult to claim that the level and quality of the visiting has increased. Pressured by reckless competitors, dwindling resources, and non-museum goers who care more about their basic instincts and artificial needs than the acquisition of new knowledge or wisdom, the heritage sector now finds itself in a delicate situation. The apotheosis of the consumerist paradise on Earth is having a negative effect on people's common sense, as it lowers their level of natural reasoning and self-reliance. So, the

<sup>138</sup><http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia>

<sup>139</sup>.idem

<sup>140</sup>Well orchestrated and media covered museum or heritage days, weeks, nights bring in the crowds and, it must be said, that some positive effects are undeniable.

conservative and spoiled community of museum users may actually be part of the problem one encounters when trying to improve it. Sometimes when museums push ahead, they find that their<sup>141</sup> public actively resists, or even encourages a return to traditional practice. They may also resent projects that too radically deceive their preconceptions. The failure of many eco-museums came down to the fact that they were refused by the very users whose needs they were supposed to serve like no other museum would.

Britain's National Maritime museum demoted Sir Francis Drake to a minor slot in its 1988 Armada show in order to "dissolve old myths and prejudices"; this petty insistence on accuracy outraged Plymouth<sup>142</sup>. Drake was the Armada; what Robin Hood is to Nottingham and Mickey Mouse to Disneyland, Francis Drake is to Plymouth" he was a sacred legacy and the crux of local tourism. A 1994 Lausanne exhibition that debunked Tell and other icons of Swiss virtue as "pseudo-historical", was savagely abused and its authors were threatened with death"<sup>143</sup>.

### **Visitors are perceptively conditioned**

Any experienced person, not to mention a psychologist, will recognise that a visitor's own circumstances can strongly influence their perception and understanding. In any given moment in our perception our brain performs an amazing exercise: any information, any sensory stimulus is instantly, in a

<sup>141</sup>By "public" one should regard usual museum goers as those whose culture would comprize museum visiting. Their lack of finesse is nothing compared to the prejudices of the non-goers or non-public.

<sup>142</sup>Lowenthal, David. *Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Cambridge University Press, 1998. P.128

<sup>143</sup>Idem p.130

fraction of a second, compared with our entire collection of past experiences and knowledge. Feedback is shaped according to its own set of premises and the resulting outcome is highly subjective and strongly emotional. We all see the same things and events differently. Therefore, to succeed we need to be convincing, persuasive and creatively moving.

### **The need for the superficial**

Museum users are all too often accustomed to instant education and tend to acquire deep and detailed knowledge too quickly and too superficially. This knowledge is hardly appropriated. Understandings would deepen with more considered involvement that would provide a form of conceptual insight that is closer to wisdom than to mere knowledge. Modern, globalized capitalism is conforming to multidisciplinary and broad insight (as well as articulating its democratic convictions), but the truth is that it prefers narrowly specialized and rather limited citizens. The better they are, the busier they grow with their consumerist worries and attempts at securing their vulnerable positions in the insecure human resources market. They do not have any pride in their jobs because they now have portable skills, unlike those positions that once required experience and acquired expertise. The young know this reality to be their only reality, so they tend to spend their time (and their lives) in a state of superficiality that lacks stable, ideal-driven expectations. Their daily life is a sensationalist, persuasive concoction that is dished up by the corporate capital. Disorientated, and without spiritual persuasions or even dreams, the masses

develop a sluggish psychology which is not new, but we have suffered enough to overcome it. In ancient Rome the saying was: "Vulgus vult decipit, ergo decipiatur"<sup>144</sup>. One must wonder if this motto is really hidden in everything that these industries that service the real and, mostly, invented needs do. These non-goers will be a constant frustration for the heritage sector. The objective is for the entire population to become museum users, but many would implicitly propose a level of expectation that the public sector should avoid at any price.

The pretentious part of the public loves the prestigious grandeur of their architecture and design of museum buildings, but they have little or no knowledge at all about the meaning of art, and nor do they care about it. They take it as a series of public "musts", of places and people that are "in" or "passé". They admire sudden success stories and old and new stars on the contemporary arts stage. It's a scene that glows; empowered by intricate, barely logical streams of money and manipulation. Thus contemporary art, having acquired eager crowds as a result of its cult icons and personalities, was used to construct a paradoxical barrier of snobbishness. The development of "cultural competence"<sup>145</sup> may be the long term mission that, for as much as it produces, it acquires a new, competent public of real users.

<sup>144</sup>"A crowd craves to be deceived, therefore let us deceive it"

<sup>145</sup>Pierre Bourdieu

## 15. Inadequate theory

My worthy friend, grey are all theories,  
And green alone Life's golden tree<sup>146</sup>.

Museology is a hundred odd years of ill success. No other attempt succeeded, if ever there was one: a science cannot be created upon the phenomenon of an institution, but on a concept. It's a long story which should ideally end with a hypothesis on the cybernetics of public memory, Mnemosophy<sup>147</sup>. Forty years ago, heritage was art and museums were museums of art, along with some additional others. Bazin<sup>148</sup> was implying that. Twenty years ago, ICOFOM was still discussing heritage as cultural heritage. New Museology and other Museologies assisted, and so we are better off than we have ever been before. But the best theory is still rare and secluded from the practical realities of the heritage occupations. There is a long way to go. Development has been slowed down by the increasing hypocrisy of the world. Rhetoric and "lip service" commonly stand

<sup>146</sup>Goethe von, J.W. Faust. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm#IV>

<sup>147</sup>Šola, Tomislav. *Essays on Museums and Their Theory. Towards the cybernetic Museum*, Finish Association of Museums, 1997.

<sup>148</sup>Bazin, Germain. *The Museum Age*. New York, Universe Books, 1967.

in for honest effort and there is a great temptation towards servitude to the new corporate masters who only focus on visitor numbers. Socialism was bad, but naïve in comparison<sup>149</sup>, as it was searching for proof that culture would improve the human condition of workers<sup>150</sup>. Instead of providing practical assistance, museologists often turn museology into an obscure science that creates an even greater divide between the pragmatists and the common-sense tendency to facilitate and improve practice with the assistance of theory.

Every professional activity should turn to theory as a system of purposeful generalizations of experience and of potential knowledge that helps the progress and improvement of the practice. The moment a theory starts to live its own life and become detached from practice, it may be useful philosophising, but it can hardly compete with wider appraisal and quickly turns off already reluctant practitioners. Eastern European Museology was often disregarded for its theorizing and its coquetry with philosophy. To an extent, that was a fair judgement, but the truth is that the West introduced Museology and then finally admitted it into universities and museums respectively. Excessive philosophizing is not just unique to memory

<sup>149</sup>Zagreb, Croatia, at the time city of 600 000 inhabitants, had in 1987 about 700 small and big exhibitions a year. The Self-Management System tried to prove that culture descended to the masses. Looking back, and forgetting unsympathetic party secretaries, - what an accomplishment! The problem with the history evaluation is that it paints it in opposing colours, whereas it was never like that: there were always admirable qualities amidst bad ones.

<sup>150</sup>One should not fall prey to the uncritical view but Bolshoy theatre was there for the working class. With ticket prices reaching over 600 dollars it is now a public institution with a withering capitalist state pushing hard for its own revenue.

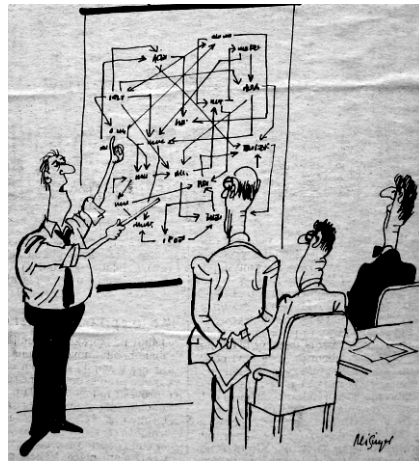
institutions only. Art is often suffocated by highly intellectual interpretations and was often significantly determined by theoretical constructions of critique and by philosophers of aesthetics. Traditional museology was viewed as obnoxious and unappealing.

### The old Museologists

Like you hear them  
say....:

One hundred odd years of Museology has a history of many contributions, influences and confluences...

There are some distinctive schools of thought... Their protagonists can be classified into several groups while each of them had periods of influence on a whole range of theoreticians and practioners alike.....



Who needs this theory? The odd researcher? Correct<sup>151</sup>.

So, which theory is adequate? The one that services practice takes the shape of condensed professional knowledge in order to ensure the transfer of professional experience. The theory of heritage occupations is the language and contents of the intergenerational communication in any of these practices. The name Museology would suggest that it

<sup>151</sup>The original caricature has been published in „Vjesnik“, Zagreb in the 1980s; the author is Otto Reisinger. I have added the comment some 15 years ago and used it for teaching Heritology or the General theory of Heritage ever since.

could be the science of an institution, yet this is a highly improbable occurrence (as there is no science to any institution other than the central concept these institutions are about) so the usable theory is a much larger problem and more a significant opportunity.

There might be a theory of museums, but there can never be a science of museums. Museum science should be based upon the concept of heritage, and therefore include museums, but comprise of other institutions and their proper occupations. The adversaries of theory forget that there cannot be a practice without a theory, that there is nothing as practical as good theory. The task of theory is to create a critical mass of different, reformed practitioners who would then change the mentality of their work environment and turn towards creating a useful museum and a usable heritage. Museums are not the artificial, mechanical hearts of dying identities, nor do they represent a sort of mummified culture that is embalmed in order to show to posterity how it looked when it was alive.

In the sixties, the discovery that museums might just be the thing that was so desperately needed saw the realisation of a democratic, educational institution for the masses, and the masses soon came to be known as the community. Having been rationalized in such a way, it was just a matter of time before a different sort of relevant theory and practice appeared to serve the community's needs. And so, eco-museums were born. In spite of the new-museology, socio-museology, eco-museology and the conceptual potential of eco-museums has not yet been absorbed by the full range of museums institutions (it's likely that the eco-



museum experience would not be suitable for, say, art museums), let alone by the rest of the heritage domain and its broadening spectrum of practices.

There is nothing so practical  
as the good theory.

Kurt Zadek Lewin, 1951

## 16. Linearity, idealizing and mythology as redundant simplifications

### History is a curious discipline

The past is lost reality. Historiography is a form of research that creates a body of knowledge that is constructed from the facts that were available at the time - on history. It is possible for everyone to be honest and respectable in their attempts as long as they are guided by ethics. But don't we fall short of the task in instances where there are many histories that each differ in content, but describe the same period, event or people and all claim to be true.

Let's look to how Mephistopheles is teaching the student about the nature of science by revealing what its nature may be:

Truly the fabric of mental fleece  
Resembles a weaver's masterpiece,  
Where a thousand threads one treadle throws,  
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither.  
Unseen the threads are knit together.  
And an infinite combination grows.  
Then, the philosopher steps in  
And shows, no otherwise it could have been:  
The first was so, the second so,  
Therefore the third and fourth are so;

Were not the first and second, then  
The third and fourth had never been<sup>152</sup>.

Museums are well practised in making the mistake of staying at the surface of the many things that make up the true fabric of life. They never show that women, however oppressed and pushed aside by society, likely played a part equal that of men in history. Their role may have not been an obvious or imposing one, but it was evidently of far greater importance than common beliefs permit. Museums offer a picture of men's history, the "correct" reflection that men have been so immensely more important. Why would a public institution consent at all to the implication that one gender was less important than the other? Is it an inherited, implied obligation, inertia or simply a by-product of the dominant culture? Talking about the waves without mentioning the wind is impossible in physics; and so it is substantiated more so by the "serious", "solid" science of physics than by the lessons of history. But history sustains simplifications and reflects power structures far beyond its time and reach. Why would museums join that if they are not just a materialization of that science? And yet, why should they be? The curator with a background in history is a curator able to collect, care and communicate drawing on the responsibility of historical science.

Actually, it is a particular kind of job that is entirely coloured by the task of interpreting things that have been lost and yet deserve to be remembered and

“The past is what you  
remember,  
imagine  
you remember,  
convince yourself  
you remember,  
or pretend  
to remember.”

Harold Pinter



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HaroldPinter.jpg>

forwarded on. During the reign of Louis XV, France was ruled more by Mme Pompadour and Mme Du Barry, than by the sovereign himself. Was it Henry VIII or Anne Boleyn that sealed the fate of Thomas More? There is no page in history where an intervention of the sort could not be inserted. Was Olimpia Maidalchini just the sister-in-law of the "righteous" Pope Innocent X, or, as some claim, his lover? The fact is that she ruled the Catholic Church with a forceful hand for some ten years and earned the well-deserved nickname La Papessa. Pasqualina Lehnert was the real-life housekeeper of Eugenio Pacelli, a Vatican diplomat who, in 1939, became Pope Pius XII. She remained with him to the end of his life, probably as a lover but, undoubtedly, she was an immense influence on him. Should we, therefore, ignore these facts and leave them to sensationalist writers and popular journalism? The official history in

museums reflects little more about real life than a stuffed tiger would about the savannah and the lives of tigers living in it.

### THE CRITIQUE OF HISTORY

**Events in the past may be roughly divided into those which probably never happened**

**and those which do not matter.**

W.R. Inge

**All history is little else than a long succession of useless cruelties.**

Voltaire

**Generalized history is a branch of speculation, connected (often rather arbitrarily and uneasily) with certain facts about the past.**

Aldous Huxley

**In history, what we consider causes are really consequences - consequences of causes that lie beyond history. The true course of history does not consist of events.**

Egon Friedell

T.Šola, University of Zagreb, 1995.

## Linearism

Having evolved past its Confucianism phase of institutional development, the modern museum prefers rules, order, classifications, formal atmosphere and science as a guarantee of all that. It much prefers any new technology over philosophical or poetical discourse, which tends to dwell too much upon imagination and instinct. Regarding itself a scientific institution, the traditional museum likes to rely exclusively upon "objective" methods of experimentation, description, observation and

verification. It is more comfortable creating knowledge within a scientific category rather than out of conscience, which may imply knowledge, but that bears ethical obligations. Memory is susceptible to easy manipulation and it is true that that possible danger may easily be avoided by relying on the "objective" and conflict-free scientific approach. In the same way, museums rarely talk about hazards and contingencies within their subject or field. In that respect they rely on conservative science and its claim to linear causality in order to determine events and developments.

The concepts of progress and linearity are not characteristic of time or history, although museums suggest otherwise. Whenever it is possible, traditional museums are, as a rule, diachronic; meaning that subjects are shown as a chronological sequence of events. Events do not always unfold at the same speed; they can be precipitous, retrograde...The strings of cause and consequence are not at all linear or comprehensible. They may appear so, and we may wish them to be, but they are often beyond our logic and insight. And indeed, what we have amassed in museum collection stores may be nothing more than an accumulation of fragments of an unknown whole.

As the philosophy of museum work is derived from different dominating sciences, depending on the type of museum, they take an extremely conservative shape in the museum context. The result is an institutionalized apology of the constraints and ineptitudes of the official science. Traditional science is still there and has suggested that things happen as a result of a succession of causalities. So the natural,

social or cultural history that we see in our museums is presented and explained as the only possible one. There is no accident, chance, luck, circumstance, imagination, wit or play, - all the legitimate ingredients of whatever we know human destinies to be, and what history is composed of.

Simple linear reality does not exist and neither does the causality that museums imply. Historical events are interpreted as myths, which are favourable to a certain political agenda or used to reinforce the importance of a nation; there are no mistakes in history, especially not one's own "side", thus history is only a logical sequence of causally connected events (and assertions which are far from true but conveniently taken to be so). They are often parts of the big myths, sometimes constructed on programmes of nationhood from the 19th century, sometimes upon common mystifications such as scientific myths, old knowledge, prejudice and general assumptions.

### **Idealisation, as avoidance of the bad and discomfoting**

The truth of museums is all too often the truth we would like to have, or the one we have grown accustomed to. The Parthenon, for instance, was not a glorious white marble pillar of pure spiritualism, but gaudy as tent at provincial fair. The Greek and Roman marble statues of gods, goddesses and heroes were painted with intense reds, blues, greens and yellows and garnished with gilded arms and other striking details. This would be a bewildering sight to any Westerner. "Hruselephantina" was a common Classical Greek technique of cladding wooden sculptures of the gods with gold plate (clothes), ivory

and amber (body). All those have disappeared and what we now have is not what the Greeks were worshipping and looking at. We are celebrating an inexistent past i.e. the myth that was created in the Renaissance. Museums provide an excellent place for the alternative stories born of our cultural projections and constructs.



Nashville, Tennessee

Museums seem to tell us a lot about everything, and take care to leave a strong impression of scientific responsibility and objectivity. But can anything be taught or instructed upon a foundation of false claims, or an avoidance of the truth? Museums barely say anything about despair, pain, fear, anger, guilt, solitariness, sorrow, anxiety, difficulties, dangers....Who will teach us that the makers of our glorious history were (also) cunning, malicious,



treacherous, revengeful, insolent, abject, cruel, nasty, biased, possessive, greedy, partial, corrupted, lustful, lecherous, scandalous, thievish, murderous, impudent, bribers, dexterous, dishonest, filthy, noisome, restive, mischievous, intemperate, envious, perjured...<sup>153</sup>

Would it be malicious to conclude from our vantage point, or from the simplified outlook of a lay person, that there is a general tendency for us to jump to the (wrong) conclusion that all bosses and masters, all our leaders and great forefathers were the same; that they were all (aside from grand humanist statesmen and exceptions alike who must be honoured ) just like those who we now see living around us today, and who, presumably, count on one day ending up in our public museums, adorned with a scientifically constructed aura that alludes to their impeccable public service. Should museum collections contain evidence of reliable truth with objective evidence that is able to make a difference and establish criteria?

In response to insecurity, instability, suppressed fear of the unknown and lack of love, museums often offer denial. All that is rationalized into security modes and "we find ourselves becoming almost addicted to obtaining material possessions, acquiring personal power, seeking sensual pleasures and craving adoration"<sup>154</sup> ... All that is the consequence of fear of death and the crave for eternity.

<sup>153</sup>This seemingly arbitrary list of attributes is taken from the Fourth Travel of Gulliver's travels (The land of horses); Jonathan Swift uses them to describe the nature of humans.

<sup>154</sup>Nick Sandberg in:

<http://www.hiddenmysteries.org/themagazine/vol12/articles/sandberg/prison-planet-2.shtml>

The impression is that literature, perhaps cinema, and certainly theatre, were always closer to the public and are able to express their true needs better because they are often able to take part in, or even moderate, societal events<sup>155</sup>. Imagine, those institutions are associated more with fiction and metaphor than with the facts! Museums, having this implicit association with science, were until some twenty years ago, absolved from the reality of the public's frustrations. Yet, they never really capitalised on the advantages of science; its reliability and supposed objectiveness in situations when the unbiased truth would have been a valuable counterweight to the madness and manipulation in society. They have never grown into an autonomous profession that would be able to deal with riskier challenges, such as admitting more truth into their discourse, for instance, even if it does not fit neatly within the underlying scientific framework. In most cases, plots, intrigue, secret deals, conspiracies and fabrications played a decisive role in whatever was finally recorded as history, and yet the very nature of these aspects of reality seems so unscientific because they cannot be securely identified and tested. And so public memory institutions took the other path: controlled deception. Many museums are therefore able to offer an idealized picture of the past; one we would like to have lived. Many others offer sets of simplifications which are motivated by many reasons, - none of them out of wisdom. Thus the world is given a scientific air and a fabricated easy explanation.

<sup>155</sup>Just remember the role of theatres in the revolution in Czechoslovakia when hundred of theatres were the communicational network building the common intellectual and political mindset that was generating revolutionary changes.

MEPHISTOPHELES:

I should not wish to see you here misguided:  
For, as regards this science, let me hint  
'Tis very hard to shun the false direction;  
There's so much secret poison lurking in 't,  
So like the medicine, it baffles your detection.  
Hear, therefore, one alone, for that is best, in sooth,  
And simply take your master's words for truth.  
On words let your attention centre!  
Then through the safest gate you'll enter  
The temple-halls of Certainty<sup>156</sup>.

With the difficult questions put to one side, and all implicit or direct blames avoided, museums can enjoy their calm and peaceful existence as a well ranked public institution.

<sup>156</sup>[Http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm#IV](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm#IV)

## 17. Mercantilism

The first serious critic of the financial temptations of museums was probably Hugues Varine, who back in the eighties, wrote and taught about the improbability that museums would be able to continue on as they were. He was questioning their "dinosaur character" and their contention on the issue of the "monetarisation of culture". He pointed out the dangers of "commercialisation" and "monetarisation". He was right, but in the meantime these problems became less obvious, having been immersed into a different kind of society, one that had a different perception of these "sins". I doubt anybody was able to imagine, at that time, the unipolar world or the disappearance and decline of the socialist alternative, or the way the state would wither away in such a paradoxical manner. Hardly anybody was able to predict that the major temptation of the 21st century would be to give way to excessive privatizations and exacerbate all of the major issues of modern civil history, - the vision of welfare state. Culture has become a commodity and not only cultural industries have appeared, but also heritage one. Gradually, the logic of cashing-in spiritual values has pushed the vision of free access to knowledge and culture aside as the modern ideal of civil society. There was the feeling

that "non-profit organisations themselves are the subject of continual and, perhaps, drastic change"<sup>157</sup>, but it never looked like it would be a revision, manipulation or possible abandonment of the ideals of the not-for-profit sector. However, the warnings were there at the time<sup>158</sup>. Still, most public institutions, with the exception of those in the States, are mostly financed by public money that is, on the whole, proportional to their income. However this is to the advantage of only a very small number of them.

Museums, especially art museums, take part in a market that is harmful to their commitment to the public and therefore weakens their moral position. To be excessively dependant on the market, and to adopt its criteria for collecting, is to play a part in the commercialization of heritage, which is not fitting for a museum. Museums are, at least through the tradition of the occidental museums, entirely exposed to this mercantilist reality. As public institutions, museums cannot compete against rich individuals, corporations or auction houses for the acquisition of objects, and will be less and less able to do so. This affiliation with the market is even worse in museums of contemporary art, where it is part of a developing reality. The quality of a collection is important for the quality and attractiveness of a museum, but the process of acquisition itself must not become an obsessive competition against the market as this becomes an exhausting exercise for a public institution.

<sup>157</sup>Foster, Marilyn K. Boards Must take Charge in the New Age. *Museum News*, July 1982. p. 24-25.

<sup>158</sup>Nielsen, Waldemar A. *The Endangered Sector*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1979

## **Dependence on private and corporate funding**

Circumstance suggests that the solution might be further a dependence upon select private or corporative funding, which may change the entire nature of the public institution. With public money at their disposal, institutions, which are by nature torpid, must not subdue to rapid changes in the market or the persuasion of those who have a vested interest, which naturally goes hand in hand with finance.

In the 1970s, the post-industrial directorate was convinced that even culture could work the same way that "the policy sciences" think<sup>159</sup>. It's a common but tricky proposal for a public institution, as it requires them to invest in a challenging bid for independence. The supposed, unattained autonomy of the profession, as much as it exists, comes from the position that was negotiated by civic tradition and the democratic aspirations in society, and also from its persuasiveness and its ability to mobilize public opinion. The gloomy prospect is that all public sectors will fall victim to the mercantile reality - that everything will become a matter of lucrative logic and value transactions. That will be doomsday for culture and, consequently, for heritage.

## **Collection donors and their influence**

Accepting donations from the mercantile world may lead to consequences that are not easy to foresee. Donors who stipulate a monthly indemnity in the contracts for their bequests, often do so by placing conditions on the acquisition of a collection, or the

<sup>159</sup>Thompson, William Irvin. *Evil and World Order*. Harper & Row Publishers. 1976.

way the works are exhibited, or by funding the construction of a museum edifice (with public money) that bears their name. In time this may finally prove to be a poorly conceived business practise. By accepting donations, subsequent conditions are often implicit. Keeping the collection an integral focal point is the most common one, and the obligation to promote certain positive qualities is usually another large component of such contracts. But collections are conceived according to a certain body of knowledge, a certain mind set, and a certain value system. By accepting them, the receiving party accepts the inbuilt criteria and taste. Private-public partnership often suffers from the superficial and irresponsible qualities of public representatives and they more often than not turn into lucrative and cost effective business deals that favour the private, often corporate side. Buying off legacies or collections with tax payers' money is a rather paradoxical way in which the majority pays for the privilege of a few.

### **Accepting a world without quality**

Business has entered culture and its many facets and it has also entered heritage. Mostly, it has come about in the simple pursuit of profit. However, heritage institutions have often played a part in the process by refusing to be relaxed and creative, or simply by accepting the fact that there is an entire alternate narrative that many people take to be more intriguing. If we fail to do our own job, and there is a great need for it, then someone else will jump in and do it. That was obvious in the 1980s, when museums were still pretty much guarded against any competition. This has increasingly become the vulnerable side of our

professional situation, where business enters and reduces the area of our activities and influence. The business in question may be mere entertainment (amusement parks, with certain aspects of heritage as loose subjects), edutainment (theme parks, referring exactly to a certain form of heritage) or a specific cultural industry (heritage industry or sort of 'museum gone wild'). The latter is of the most concern, because at that point heritage is pretentiously taken as the object of entrepreneurial interest and profitable exploitation. Business avoids any form of cultural sophistication or consideration that might reduce the profit value of the attractions, and thus reduces the value of the very object of its interest and, indirectly, the efforts of heritage institutions, that appear pale against their attractiveness. There has never been anything wrong with buying and selling. After all, it is a form of exchange and it meets certain needs. But a singular fascination with profit (of which total formal and moral de-regulation is sad proof) ultimately brings destruction, no matter which domain it is restricted to. Just as our environment can be polluted and destroyed by misuse, so can our culture.

Any kind of world is possible and plausible, provided that we are encouraged and invited into it. We may be convinced by engineered circumstances and by the media. Public institutions have been carefully orchestrated and reduced to the minimum levels required for only basic solidarity and consideration from the paupers. We can live without access to the culture, we can imagine the world without wild life, we may accept life without natural food and an existence that is no longer ruled by the laws of



nature....Anything can be manipulated to suit certain particular interests. Some of the most basic human rights (life, freedom, security, privacy, food, air, water, human dignity, education...) are becoming increasingly violated (so are the basic freedoms). The hypocritical illusion created by the power holders that they care, is of little use to us. In fact, as societies, we never talked as much as we currently do about the need to preserve and keep and maintain and protect....It is hard to believe that it's all just a cover for further violations of the very same nature.

Museums and other heritage institutions do however represent a powerful source of cultural DNA, and they may become a significant instrument in the revival of heritage. The time for "giving back" has never really arrived, but it may just come in an unprecedented manner. Heritage and identity may become a new creative choice for us all. By injecting the missing criteria and eroding senses back into life, museums can provide arguments for resistance and a better quality of living.

The mercantile product is a standardized package containing predetermined contents and a price tag. No fortuitous occurrence. If museums start to produce an ever increasingly certainty around past happenings, i.e. still pictures of the past, they may have a chance at passing as nostalgia, but there are better agents in the market for that. They can easily join with the media vainglory (but will not be the central players, by the way), but they would have to betray their mission first. The constitutive element of theory, this new future science, is the feeling of emptiness and guilt that has gripped our growing trade. We have risen from a very

deep need, an undeniable temple of civil ambition wanting noble public memory. On the way we have been transformed into institutions as this need was taking on seductive guises and disguising itself under the popular ambitions of the ruling forces and their way of looking at the world.



### **Selling to survive**

National Academy Museum  
Frederic Edwin Church's "Scene on the Magdalene" (1854), an oil on canvas.

### **Commoditization of concept and praxis**

To an extent, rising financial pressures will ameliorate services but, eventually, will lead to desperate compromises in the very nature of public institutions. A hungry museum will look desperately for any sort of financial salvation during long periods of fasting. The act of de-accessioning describes the tendency to sell part(s) of a museum's holdings and is a particularly dangerous undertaking as it involves changing the nature of museums. The sad truth is that museums long ago accepted the market's invitation. So it seems that what has been bought can also be sold. The very same

logic has led to the privatisation of museums and it is still a factor in the possible fall of the entire public sector. Should water and air be concessional to private investors? In fact to an extent they are. So the realistic conclusion is that public memory shall be given over to private business to manage on behalf of society. The Orwellian premonition is there. In the case of Italy in early 2000, there was a sort of *coup* being pushed by the ever more disappointing politicians, in which real privatisation would have actually eventuated. However, when mentioned elsewhere in Europe, it rarely implies the translation of heritage institutions, museums especially, into the "first sector"<sup>160</sup>; that belonging to private business. But it is more a kind of institutional emancipation in which the employees for a separate legal subject become a professional body (corporation, in fact) in charge of running the public institution for the public interest<sup>161</sup>.

It's too huge a challenge for a profession that is just now emerging, and yet, just as good a reason to finally have one<sup>162</sup>. Even though some reasons for de-accessioning may be legitimate, different solutions should take priority. Any useful theory would emphatically advise that in the course of changing circumstances museums re-define themselves as public institutions: be it in their role as depositories of collective memory, communicators of past experiences, or becoming a huge, networked sector

<sup>160</sup>Ross, Richard; Tucker, Marcia; Mellor, David. *Museology. A New Images Book*, 1989. p.43; the "second sector" would be that of the government, and the third would be the non-profit, non-governmental organizations.

<sup>161</sup>The first and the most advanced practice of the sort was the famous Delta Plan in the Netherlands, in the late 1980s.

<sup>162</sup>I have been lecturing and writing about the future heritage mega-profession and still intend to publish some of my writings on the topic.

able to use those resources cumulatively: in mutual loans, exchanges and the re-distribution of collections, the division of functions, and, finally, through using new technologies for storage and communication. In brief, doing more with less. For the common good and for public ownership, there will hardly ever be any useful or effective long term alternative, no matter how far we progress with concessions for the new reality of the (only surviving) ideology of profit.

Of course, those among us who see reality in a pragmatic way will justifiably ask if anything was ever wrong with earned profit. The answer is nothing, indeed, at least theoretically. But, when profit becomes the only law, products and users move into extreme positions. The poor get poorer, and end up in a subtle web of enslavement, while the rich get fabulously rich and monopolize all the resources. Profit brings new forms of effectiveness and forces one dollar to do the job of two, yet the surplus that is generated is gobbled up by obscene luxuries for a small few. Products also change. Those of quality soar in price and become accessible only to those at the top level of society, while excellence belongs only to the *richissime*. As quality withdraws into an inaccessible domain, the lower levels of society are offered replicas and fabricated mass manufactured products that are of little value. The poor may produce organic or ecological food, but they will be so badly paid for it that they themselves consume cheaper GMO foods which are very low in nutritional value and dangerous to health.

If everything can be sold, than everything becomes a marketable product. Those with the money, or those

intending to get it due to a belief in the myth that money is available to all, will support the idea of omnipresent and omnipotent profit. So why should it matter that it opens the door to a wicked way of life "bellum omnium contra omnes" (everybody fights everybody), if one believes in being a victor and gaining all the spoils. Money spent becomes an additional measure of relevance. The most expensive and most prestigious projects, such as iconic, unique buildings by extravagant architects, become prototypes for what is regarded as the best. Yet, those familiar with the practice would know that the probability of making a bad project increases with the amount of money and ambition that is invested in it. To make it all the more true, most of these projects are not only burdened by the excessive expectations of powerful stakeholders, but are also done in haste, often to align with some political timeframe. It is not, however, often very obvious that the project in question is bad. The mere size and magnificence of it may prevail in public opinion and therefore the public image remains relatively stable in the domain of "musts". More detailed estimates and evaluations would reveal better ways to spend finances or develop attractive collections. Needless to say, the cult of big, influential, unparalleled appearance or prestige still remains intact. But, at the end of the day, gigantic museums are hardly necessary.

Under the governance of profit, culture and heritage turn into marketable, attractive, standard, desirable products, which mean that both culture and its heritage aspects are shaped into what the market owners want them to be, or rather, what will generate them maximum profits. Again, is there anything wrong with

that: if the market wants it and somebody delivers it...? If love equals sex, then the former statement is correct. If *figurae veneris* describes a sexual relationship, again, the market should command our lives. We have seen that the self-regulatory aspect of the market does not exist, because the market itself depends upon the value system and will produce what is desired. So there will be only more chaos if chaos is what proves to generate the extra profit. Apparently, if commoditisation is imposed upon *singularisation*, users are left with "anomalies in cognition", "inconsistence in values" and "uncertainties in action"<sup>163</sup>

The fatal bifurcation describing profit is the difference between the wishes and the needs. The first leads to vanity, and the latter to wisdom. Wishes and desires are the commercial domain's heaven, but it should be the needs that guide the public sector. Do we return to a communist state to tell us what we need? God forbid, none of the past historic ideologies will do. A charter of human rights and liberties would. We fought for it for centuries, and even created The New World in order to prove that a new start is possible. It remains possible. The failure of both dominant ideologies is a defeat for us all. Of course, ethical concerns and doubts around the New Order are denounced nowadays as politically suspicious moralisation and are dismissed. In any case, it will remain true that a sense of measure and ethics reign over our human presence on the Planet.

<sup>163</sup>Kopytoff, Igor. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities On Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1986. chapter: *The Cultural Biography of Things: commodization as process*, p.82

## 18. Professionalism, or the lack of it

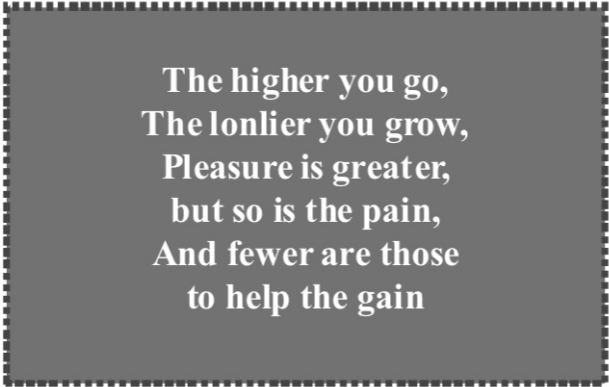
Throughout these texts the terms profession and professionalism have been used, but the fact is, curators, for example, and the wider group that is central to this consideration, are not yet a profession. Neither are librarians or archivists, to mention just a few of the occupations from an entire domain that is aspiring to a higher status. The statement "All professions are a conspiracy against laity"<sup>164</sup> may not be literally true, but it rightfully suggests that they often fail in their public mission and do so, basically owing to a lack of professionalism. Any real commitment to professionalism would ensure a sense of responsibility and a set of ethics that would guard against deficiencies. Thus incompetence appears to be widespread due to a simple lack of concern, or a lack of professional skills, be they vocational or skills acquired through training. "It is easy for a museum to get objects; it is hard for a museum to get brains"<sup>165</sup>. An open, friendly, insightful profession that is self-

<sup>164</sup>By Bernard Shaw; this was a favoured quotation by Kenneth Hudson, who was known for his harsh criticism of curators; the best among them found it highly inspiring and motivating, as he was the best Citizen Visitor the world has seen so far. He, like J.Cotton Dana, who was thought to be a real curator and museum director, assumed the position of the public and did it in a convincing way so that their criticism thus gained legitimacy.

<sup>165</sup>Dana, John Cotton. *A Plan for a New Museum*. Elm Tree Press: Woodstock, Vermont, 1920. P.1

confident and clear on its criteria would serve as a generous "*arbiter elegantiarum*"<sup>166</sup>, ever ready to offer reliable judgement in matters concerning the evaluation of the inherited world and extracting its values for continuation and re-use.

## What awaits true professional advancement



The higher you go,  
The lonlier you grow,  
Pleasure is greater,  
but so is the pain,  
And fewer are those  
to help the gain

© Tomislav Šola, 1997/99

It seems that there is a lack of professional critique. This is a very bad sign for a domain which is in need of advancement and improvement. It will only be able to succeed in doing that through self-evaluation. This book attempts to compensate for this deficit. The books that are still to be written must seek to encourage the avant-garde and innovation. Unfortunately, only the creative connoisseurs in the establishment can become its vanguard because they know what they should distance themselves from. As for innovation,

<sup>166</sup>A person who prescribes, rules on, or is a recognized authority on matters of social behavior and taste. (Merriam-webster.com/dictionary/arbiter%2Belegantiarum)



only heretics and rebels can bring it in. Obsolete rules cannot be avoided if: they do not exist or if no one is aware of them. In both cases, whenever that is true, lack of professionalism is caused by the absence of a convincing body of conceptual and practical professional criteria. Any profession is always formed anew in the space between acceptance and protest against the rules, but not knowing them is an inexcusable failure, a sort of *vitium artis*, a professional mishap. The situation is quite similar in the plastic arts, where artists should be obligated to dispose of *connaissance de metier* in arts, whether they are expressed through body or land art, minimal art or through a plain white canvas.

## THE STAGES OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMPLEXITY

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### 1st stage of profession

#### PRACTICAL

state of mind:

#### CLEVERNESS

trying to devise craftier ways  
to successful function of institutions

#### taxonomic phase

theoretical level:

#### MUSEOGRAPHY

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## 2nd stage of profession

### PRAGMATIC

state of mind:

KNOWLEDGE;

tries hard to organize and manage the most effective institution for transfer of knowledge; intensive activity; omnipresence; conformist to dominant forces of society;

### quantitative phase

theoretical level:

MUSEOGRAPHY

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## 3rd stage of profession

### IDEALIST

state of mind:

WISDOM;

understands the concept of total heritage and devises the ways (institutional and non-institutional) to respond to specific public needs; follows the life logic and mobilizes the interested parties on projects of harmonious continuity and survival; acts and counter-acts, doing what is right, guided by a strong ethical responsibility, moderating thus the forces of change;

### qualitative phase

theoretical level:

HERITOLGY/MNEMOSOPHY/HERITAGE STUDIES

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## **Difficulties with philosophy, concepts, mission and ethics**

Upon which presumption should museums operate - that humans are good or evil? Would it matter to them at all either way? Should it? They seem not to care, so how do they know what to do for people? Is the past good for them? How much memory should one offer to people in order to be sure they will make good use of it? The story of the profession is a long one and, up to the present point, it has not been treated with the attention it deserves. We passed the time of specialist-researchers as the only type of curators a long time ago. But still, most of them, in any number of countries, are still specialists in a certain subject or field depending on the position they occupy. To be a curator in a modern sense, no matter what the position in a museum, one should take active part in the entire working process of the museum, which is no longer scientifically defined (although performing research is a fundamental part of the function), but defined by communication. As the professional development has already been defined, to go into that further would require too much space. So, one does not make a collection (or research) a priority based on whether the collection of malacology, for example, is the most in depth one, but as the how the story of molluscs would be told in the most purposeful, interesting (and why not entertaining?) way to the people who would never otherwise have known what malacology was. In reality, what do we have instead? Endless rows of specialists who only entered museums because they obtained a diploma in a specialised field of study. Most of them, in most countries, even in places where

Museology and Heritage studies do exist, enter museums without the slightest knowledge of what the role of curators or other museum positions even entail. Some, however, graduate from a course only after they have passed a professional exam in front of other curators. That helps, but it may also be harmful in two ways. Firstly, it has the potential to create the feeling that professional theory and insight just amount to a week or two of browsing through the relevant literature. With this mind set, it becomes easy to discredit those who claim it to be a far more serious matter than that. Secondly, as has happened in many countries I know; the conservative curators who sit in on these exams filter out those who are ambitious and visionary because they are the future threat to their status quo.

There is also an anomaly relating to the pervasive influence of the system that encourages sinecures. Back then, especially in the former Soviet Block and in many other former socialist countries, we have had curators as passive, often bureaucratic, lazy clerical workers with positions in a state run and financed scientific institute of museums<sup>167</sup>. This has been the natural consequence of their shelter and protection from all the challenges of modern life and so they are removed from the frustrations of their community. Their behaviour and mismanagement is proverbial<sup>168</sup>. Some of it survives due to the fact that the museum

<sup>167</sup>This is part of a long story; it's less critical of museum curators and concerned more with the dominant social atmosphere in which indolence and indifference were the most widespread form of corruption. It persists in a number of ways, depending on the country and region, and poses a considerable problem for planners and consultants.

<sup>168</sup>In one country, they had an extra day off on account of their scientific field research. A curator in charge of a collection, who I knew, retired with two museum objects catalogued.

sector, outside of the European Union and US, is hardly touched by the sweeping, ruthless, but often sadly logical, economic logic of the new, liberal paradigm. Once they face the new reality, it will prove to be disastrous because all their positive aspirations will be undermined by a lack of professionalism. This insufficiency acts as a type of sabotage that undoes any constructive internal initiatives or assistance from outside. Most of those curators, if they keep their jobs, will fold to the temptations of shortcut logic: they lose sight of safeguarding the dignity of their role and turn into permissive, compliant servants under the new power groups of their transitional societies. For them, marketing becomes merchandizing and no sponsor is denied as long as they provide some lucrative, or even personal, advantage.

### **Facing the harsh profit paradigm**

Somehow, the new nationalist concern, together with an air of exclusivity and mystification based on science, has kept this occupation away from the attention of the reformers. They will need to feel the cold hand of economic law at some point, and hopefully, just enough to increase their performance indicators and significantly improve their mission. Culture has moved towards "industry" and its harsh rules wiped out thousands of artists who were living on state subsidies. Needless to say, this supported mediocrity but was unpopular with significant, creative individuals. On the other hand, many aspects of culture were accessible and in abundance.

The future, as far as we can anticipate, will hopefully bring unprecedented prosperity, together with harsh challenges and uncomfortable redefinitions. Not only

to the curators of the former East, but everywhere, however that depends of course on how advanced the "profession" is. This all inclusive profit-orientation will cause much upheaval. It's likely that museums will have to battle to survive. They will have to prove that, when they are excellent, they actually have the potential to earn (though indirectly) more than any normal business, but they will also have to make this conviction and this excellence part of their professional awareness. To take part in the battle for quality of life, because that is what they are about, they will have to change from within. This is why our best professionals have difficulties understanding the real nature of the museum boom that has occurred in the last half of the century. Some reasons are paramount: the monstrous acculturation and disculturation<sup>169</sup> caused by the processes of globalisation<sup>170</sup> and transition that resulted in a defensive reaction; the nostalgic desire to retain the mythized values of former times as a result of the dramatic speed of change and, finally, the tourist industry that made visible the cultural potentials that their economic and public image uses<sup>171</sup>. But the expansion of museums is far from a happy

<sup>169</sup>I am using the term disculturation to describe the loss of any culture as a result of an inability to find cultural coherence after moving away from the values of one's own culture and not appropriating any others. Two other usages I am aware of suggest the meanings of: being closer to acculturation, or the psychological effects suffered by inmates.

<sup>170</sup>Globalisation taken in its general meaning is the basic description of civilization. What I describe here is more a new colonialism, uglification and pauperisation of the world as a consequence of the New Order and New Right.

<sup>171</sup>In place marketing, country branding, cultural diplomacy etc.

circumstance by any means. It's bad that we need them more. What's at stake is the big developmental paradigm, in which culture and heritage may play a serious role. They establish the cultural basis of sustainable development<sup>172</sup>, but they could potentially slip into the category of "resources" within the booming soft business of culture.

### **Are we behaving ethically?**

If museums appropriate "exit oriented behaviour" they will not be able to compete with other attractive and popular institutions. The neurosis that develops from trying to discern the difference between what their reality is and that of their environment, must be reduced by their counter-activity. More often than not, they fail to do so. As we take up different themes, in professional reality we perceive that they are each interconnected within the whole working process of any heritage institution. There is an ethical dimension to anything museums do. Museums, as a rule, present the results of their research to the public, and yet, much more could be said and achieved by presenting the research itself. As states become poorer, the temptation to compromise the non-profit public face becomes a serious threat. The heritage domain is starving for research and must have a defensive strategy, such as outsourcing or new strategic alliances in place. Otherwise, as has been demonstrated, sadly, by its recent efforts toward media attractiveness, the heritage industry becomes

<sup>172</sup>Sustainable development is so dependent on balanced judgement and virtuous concerns that, if taken technically instead of ethically, it sounds more like wishful thinking.

the option for museums. We see some serious institutions, even the ones that are too serious, becoming cheap venues overnight with horrible, sensationalist shows that flirt with popular taste. There is nothing other than true professionalism that can re-strike the balance, and that is not possible without obligatory professional training.



All professions are  
conspiracies against  
the laity.

The Doctor's Dilemma  
1906  
Act I  
Bernard Shaw

The exclusion of museums may be a social defect but it's also a matter of ethical attitudes. Marketing experts<sup>173</sup> are aware of how wrong a "non responsive museum" is when leaving its visitors in "bewilderment". If museums appear to the majority as peevish and morose, it is not only down to certain elitism but a matter of ethical approach as well. Curators have to have superior knowledge, education and experience to be able to serve the community. They cannot, like catholic priests (with all due respect), pretend to be able to offer useful advice on

<sup>173</sup>Kotler, Neil; Kotler, Philip. Museum Strategy and Marketing: Designing Missions, Building Audiences, Generating Revenue and Resources. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1998. P.75



marriage. Owing to the same lack of comprehension is the implied expectation that the museum is there to mould public or individual opinion. In actual fact, it should be about providing material for freedom. But, if the opening hours of museums coincide with the daily working hours of their prospective visitors then the message is: we are open for those of you who can manage to come. Conversely, when they remain open to facilitate evening visits, the message is clearly reversed. Marketing is not the art of selling what does not exist, but way of thinking and set of skills that goes towards fulfilling the mission. But it all starts with knowing the user. If, in a sunny Mediterranean town all museums close during the two hour lunch period that is fine for the residents but bad for tourists.

As much as we "de-professionalize" museums by letting the community take part in whatever the working processes are, we are still getting closer to true professionalism and "de-institutionalisation". True professionals know the subtleties of their jargon, their specific "linguaggio" however, with their users; they speak in terms that they can relate to. However, any profession is naturally inclined to mystify its position, its theory and procedures. Should we appropriate the MTS? Of course, it is the "minimal transmission strategy"<sup>174</sup>; a new means of efficiency that perceives any professional as a sort of well-paid process manager and supervisor.

<sup>174</sup>The ways the theorists gain their importance is a joke, a relatively sound sort of a new pun, a good quibble to fill a void in vocational commitment, if required. Yet, it is not as bad as it sounds because the future will look quite like that, whether anybody remembers this joke or not.

## **Occupation, not profession**

Students graduate and become experts in a certain academic discipline. Some of them, according to discipline, are employed with no prior work experience in museums whatsoever.

### **To do our job well,**

be it in a tiny museum or a huge institution,  
we have to master four areas of expertise and insight:

1. knowing the nature of the world in which museums operate and our users live well
2. having a clear philosophy of the profession that ensures total understanding of museum and heritage ideas
3. knowing our users perfectly
4. Having a good knowledge of the techniques, methods and procedures that make up the museum working process

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**Only the fourth expertise can be learnt on the job,  
although it is not advisable: it's too long and expensive.**

They encounter a specific task that relates in some way to the public interest; however they have not received the suitable training to properly undertake it. More often than not, they pick up the working process and learn as they go along, so to speak. If they are lucky enough to learn it from somebody who knows the task well, then that that is fine, but there are few of those, especially in small museums outside the city centres. In these circumstances, curatorial work is not a profession but an occupation because it doesn't fulfil the necessary requirements of the role. Designers,

architects, managers, etc. all have stronger arguments and higher fees than curators, because they are backed by the strong arguments of a well-organized profession. With this preliminary weakness, the museum "profession" is often incoherent and disorganized. If curators do not receive adequate training prior to working in museums, they will act with a fundamental lack of professionalism, whether it is being impudent to visitors or a lack of knowledge about how to handle museum objects, they have not mastered the subtle public value of heritage, the nature of the museum - its mission.

## **WHAT PROFESSION ?**

### **SOME ELEMENTS**

1. obligatory training in the historical & scholarly principles of the profession and its skills and methods
2. legal regulations of status, social function and position
3. license system
4. ethical codex
5. high standards of performance and achievement
6. specific professional culture
7. autonomy in action
8. specific methods of research and performance
9. set of open and anticipatory working definitions
10. idealistic objectives

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12

Therefore, most museum curators who finish university education are, at best, experts in their respective academic discipline. They end up in museums by some other attraction, be it contingency, or by the mere fact that nothing else was available. On rare occasions some have a vocational urge and

fascination with things from the past that are concentrated into a single collecting institution, or the care and communication of accumulated heritage. To any lay person who is culturally unconditioned, these appear almost bizarre; a refuge for unnecessary things and yet, somehow, they are important enough not to be rejected.

Until the day we have trained curators, many museums will remain closer to an interpreted specialist collection, keeping specialist divisions and interpretations of the world beyond lay understanding. Of course, still further, there would be a justifiable claim that an art historian or anthropologist be employed, say, in a technical museum. Much of the technology there exposed has more to do with history of culture or design than with technique or physics which are so thoroughly imposed. With such an approach and adequate training in mind, engineers there would not be curators by the mere fact that they have gained employment in a museum institution.

Self-analysis, as being the recognition of mishaps and deficiencies of practice, is, first of all, an obligatory part of any theory and provides an opportunity for us to learn from our mistakes. The museum sector is tired of limping behind the real professions. Heritage "professionals" are burdened by the inherent conservatism in their ranks, most of them superficially acquired their knowledge, are semiskilled, trained on the job, and quite a few are simply frustrated by their meagre role in society. Meanwhile, the importance of public memory is rising; it's becoming paramount for the development

of society. The shortcomings of this *profession to be* often end up being stuck in a mind-set, unable to follow anything but inherited routines. This last one impacts upon the professional performance of the would-be reformers like quicksand: the more one works against it, the more one sinks into it. Instead of guilt, what we should be seeking is a sturdy professional conscience which instils a sense of belonging not to an interest group, but to a profession devoted to its public commitment.

**About 90 % of museum staff may be considered as semi-skilled for the job**

**If you really think a bio-technologist-nutricionist is automatically qualified to become a curator in the Food Museum, then how about making him or her the head chef in the your favourite restaurant?**

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So far, it has not worked. But it will if efforts are supported first by obligatory, advanced professional education and, second, by redefining the scope of the profession. The probable outcome is that neither the science of museums nor the profession of curators will make it, the very same way that the librarians and archivists won't make it either if they try to alone. Of course, there are many more occupations that are concerned with public memory and they will find a

way to recognize their higher and more extensive profile within the framework of a future profession. Contrary to what an eager conservativist would assume, all occupations will retain their autonomy and specificity, but will increasingly believe in the wider definition of their mission. Conservators are travelling curators, so their task to preserve what are generative features of a certain urban identity does not differ from that of curators. If united by a practice that is richer in its hybridisation than we ever wanted to believe, will they all find comfort?

Outside the rich countries, too many ambitious and desirable curators are feeling resigned and discouraged. In many other countries curators are, as a rule, political outsiders. There is no valid reason for that peculiarity, except for the fact that they do feel a lack of importance - unlike medical doctors or architects who are real professions. Is that why they have this servile mentality and feel relieved when they can dive back into the hermetics of their Science? Many among the curators, and other heritage occupations, feel, or even know, that they will one day gain unprecedented importance when they become a part of a mega-profession of carers and communicators of heritage who are well respected and well paid for their job.

#### Transfer of the professional experience

- How to understand the true nature of heritage institutions
- How to develop professional intelligence (IQ)
- How to understand the profession and gain a sense of measure
- How to encourage and inspire professional creativity
- How to develop a professional language, style and taste

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The frustrations of our colleagues in the developing or poor countries are greater of course, because this transitional world faces curious problems which derive from their context. There is an unprecedented avalanche of information from the rich North/West. And with it arrived the English language; westernisation (if not, indeed Americanisation) devalues local culture as consequence of its influence. Therefore English does not come as a *lingua franca* (which is good), but as a transfer of foreign values, resulting in typical acculturation. Of course, local languages are maintained, but through its daily use, be it in the media or at public places or events, they give way to the use of English. If Nike's sneakers are 75% imported culture and 25% basic sneaker, culture can hardly be any different. The novelty is that acculturation is reaching higher and higher in the societal layers. For example, in the Balkan region, and little wider (maybe elsewhere too), we are witnessing a change in the notion of what the name for the basic professional position in heritage institutions should be: "kustos" has become "kurator". The first is a European word for museum keeper which is as old as museums themselves, and the second is a badly written and badly pronounced American word for the same position. Both have Latin origins and basically equate to the same concern, same care, keeping, overseeing, and guarding of heritage. It is no wonder that the media prefers to use language that seems to be at the cutting edge of Americanisation: terms that are superior by their origin. What is rather alarming is the rising number of former "kustos" allow this "slip" into current media *linguaggio* and refer to themselves

using the media driven term "kurator"<sup>175</sup>. It makes them feel more credible and important. It would be just another tragicomical use of English in the globalisation colonies<sup>176</sup> were it not for the fact that it is supported and endorsed by those who are in charge of the local heritage and, more so, of local identity. This is just one aspect of their self-disqualifying attitudes.

### **Managing a profession with little professional democracy**

Curators, like any other occupation within the domain of heritage, have their global, regional, and national associations. There sit their representatives who are mostly called upon to improve their respective trade, their mission and the quality of the product they deliver to the users. The unfortunate fact is that most of these guild institutions suffer themselves from institutionalism and the illnesses inherent in any democratic procedure. Democracy is either merely a method of deliberating common interests, or the very substance of carrying out the decisions that serve these interests most adequately. Any democratic process is commensurate to the quality of the judgement when making choices, and the latter, is directly dependent upon the level of professional insight. So, paradoxically, those better off are the professionals

<sup>175</sup>From a spontaneous enquette, it seems that they assign some more profound significance to this meaning, and feel that it works to their benefit. Experienced as I am in the matter of the borders between the East and West, I find it to be an example of acculturation; being a disease in those who are supposed to be the barrier against it.

<sup>176</sup>Like many, I find it a logical consequence that many American or English people unconsciously appropriated the domineering attitude of their parent culture, whereas the truth, it is sadly sinking into history; Americans have changing patterns of behaviour and corporate knowledge that run society, but they do not have a culture in the traditional sense.



taking part in the decision making (about their organisation of the profession). And, thus, the better the chances become for further improving its condition. The representatives in charge are often chosen according to criteria, rather than their professional qualities. International organisations are either led by visionaries or by opportunists. The first kinds are very visible because of their results, but they are a minority because they impose hard work on themselves and expect the same from the others. They are often opinionated and rigid in their vision. Their motivation is often hard to follow. Therefore, they are rejected by the voting majority and, instead, main-streamers, soft speaking, inconspicuous fence-sitters are elected to represent and lead: the job they, in fact do not want, but they like the sense of importance. They are either unable, or reluctant, to take any risks and tend to insist in their positions.

Having studied the profession alongside some of the best minds, I realized early on that the heritage

A real **SIN** to avoid: **Sinecure**

- An office or position requiring little or no work is a sinful endeavour, especially in the domain of social and communal responsibility

- But there may be many others. I like to refer to them as the **HISTORY** not to be repeated.

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professions have too few women in positions of decision-making<sup>177</sup>. However, in the West, they prevail or make up a considerable percentage, and museums became quite advanced. This same logic may not apply in the former communist countries, where female directors are often chosen for their willingness to act obediently under the value system of patriarchal society. Although the pendulum of the political mind naturally sways into neo-conservatism, for many, this creates a puzzling paradox<sup>178</sup>.

In the past, all too often in Eastern Europe especially, not only directors but also curators, were chosen for the job by negative selection. The deficit of professionalism will first manifest itself as a rejection, or a hostile attitude, towards vocationally educated candidates for employment at a museum. The same attitude exists towards colleges and schools that offer modern vocational education. The existing position is thus secured with the hope that it will last until retirement. Heritage institutions have long-term and long-lived directors; they often occupy positions for decades in the same institution, and commonly, except for periods of study and a few years of curatorship, they stay in that role for the duration of career. Are there not more effective ways of preserving the institution itself and all its methods than to utterly contradict the changing challenges of the

<sup>177</sup>Back in the late 1990s, Kenneth Hudson used to say that Finnish museums are good because they are mostly run by women; the truth was probably that women there were performing far above the European average.

<sup>178</sup>To equate the hammer and sickle with the swastika, which to the Western mind can seem like an acceptable equation, in Eastern Europe gears the position of the pendulum toward an immediate tidal wave of fascism.

environment? Indeed, probably not<sup>179</sup>. This kind of negative selection is still the case in many countries. In some, new political party elites divvy up control of all the public institutions by placing their representatives in the boards. As boards control institutions, and play a decisive role in electing directors, the political "suitability" of the candidate, or plain old corruption, dictates over qualifications or talent. Needless to say this "selection" suits people of modest vocational intelligence and little ambition well, hence the atmosphere of reluctance and pretension they generate.

This explains why so many institutions in so many countries have such a poor rating for creative and innovative projects. In many former socialist countries directors still enjoy the benefit of official cars with drivers, to name just one of their privileges. Employing new staff thus becomes a domino effect guided by the same logic. This, in turn, explains why, in so many countries, heritage institutions are overstaffed; some are even crowded due to invented positions. It is not rare that a museum would employ its own designer or a photographer on a full time salary. These are typical jobs for outsourcing and quite a sinecure for such employees. Employing marketing managers or additional other staff has reached quite absurd scale. The literature on marketing advises that sorts of permanent positions become rentable when

<sup>179</sup>In my experience as a museum consultant, I discovered that the very person that engaged me most was the brakesman, a secret opponent of the self-initiated "reform". After creating an atmosphere of change and openness, the project could comfortably encounter difficulties with financing or lack of political support; in brief, one would realize that it was primarily meant for the drawer.

visitor numbers reach levels of up to one hundred thousand a year. Alas, over half of these thousands of workers who are employed in invented, overestimated positions, lose their jobs.

It is the nature of matter and of humans alike to resist change, and take any on-going permanent position without question. For a long time, museum jobs, and many other positions in other public heritage institutions, were the epitome of sinecure. Therefore, reformers and visionaries stood little chance. The important purpose of this critique is to acknowledge the fact that the best among us should fill these strategic positions. They would be able to negotiate a better position for the profession with key stakeholders and assure an internal commitment to building the profession. That might be one description of professionalism. Gradually turning into a mega profession will, hopefully, still allow timely preparation for an accountable and relevant position.

## 19. Paseotropia

Paseotropia<sup>180</sup> is the overemphasized orientation, tendency and inclination towards whatever is past and gone. The majority of heritage institutions are naturally oriented towards distant pasts which, though it sounds more than logical, brings about controversial consequences: passeism, nostalgia, conservatism, Medusa's touch....In most traditional museums, the past is made, and believed to be better than the present; curators often think that museums are dedicated to the past and that they should somehow defend and advocate it. As a result of this fascination with the past and with history as its many articulated versions, they tend to degrade the present and fail to take it into account. Thus, they fail to serve their community. "We do not want to be aware of this present, but as we cannot get out of the present our only escape is into memories. Here we are on safe ground, for the past is fixed and known - but also, of course, it's dead (...)" In other words, we try to adapt ourselves to the mysterious present by comparing it with the (remembered) past, by naming and

<sup>180</sup>Thropia in ancient Greek: bend, curve, turn, a turning; response to stimulus; I coined this neologism in the 1990s for my lectures. Like the other earlier neologism, heritologia (1981), it is an equally clumsy (but frequently employed) mixture of greek and latin. I still find it useful when developing critical premises for the heritage domain.

'identifying' it"<sup>181</sup> . When we are estranged from our present we suffer from a very specific dissonance, a kind of alienation, a neurosis and it's fatal for our notion of reality. It may well be induced by the ruling powers and their institutions, probably even involuntarily. It is a product of their very nature, as it renders humans insecure and easier to rule. Both the past and future are easily fulfilled promises: one you did not live early enough to enjoy and the other one you will fail to enjoy by dying too soon.

Today, we are discovering what was happening yesterday, and tomorrow we shall be finding out what was happening today. It is unfair to consent to conduct our lives in such a way. As I heard somebody say: "In yesterday, we find what we miss today", there we also create the sense that we have reached peace, far from the hectic and terrifying transience. Low-quality communication in museums is often based on a nostalgia that cultivates an uncritical bias for the past. It is a sort of escape from reality that associates the past with imaginary values. The past is whatever is not the future, and the thin, mobile zone in between should make the notion of it closer to the present in order to make the fascination with what is far away in time more relevant.

Owning the past is an attribute of rulers and the rich. "The poor, notoriously, leave little detritus behind"<sup>182</sup>. It's been suggested that, the more past one has the more important one is. The same goes for the

<sup>181</sup>Watts, Alan W. *The Wisdom of Insecurity. A Message For an Age of Anxiety*. Vintage Books, New York, 1951.93

<sup>182</sup>Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean (ed). *Museum, media, Message*. Routledge. London. 1995., p.110

community. The curious fact indeed is that this may correspond with some aspects of importance but, on the other hand, a large past is usually expressed in the accumulation of rare and precious objects. The implication is that less affluent, or even poor, people would immediately become unworthy and unimportant by comparison. This may be an implicit understanding of the sense of past through a rough and vulgar world-view, but it's a certain life philosophy that works for the rulers. And yet, that cannot be the way of collective memory and its institutions.

As paradoxes may be a rather natural characteristic of the world, many poor nations are rich in heritage, but they are unable to maintain it and so they become victims of illicit trade or reckless exploitation by the business sector. Ever since corporations were allowed to own entire countries, even smaller companies can own interesting pockets of a poor nations' assets. Therefore, colonialism is legally back as a by-product of globalizing business. Of course, local museums never learned that they are about identity and development or about sets of positive values that directly contribute to their community's prosperity.

Implicitly conveying to visitors that the past was more important makes the present seem banal and less worth living. It also positions curators as victims to a certain passeist syndrome, which the public interprets as a right to nostalgia. Most curators never question what appears most logical to them; that museums are about the past and that their task is to explain it, protecting it, or advocate its significance. By way of this irrevocable submersion into past, they discredit the present and hardly serve it, if they do at all. Though

they should know better, in the world of fleeting reality where change is the only constant, permanence and stability in the view of pascotropy seems to be the correct answer. The heavy losses to the stable substance of reality were what created museums and entrusted them to sciences. It took scientists a hundred years<sup>183</sup> or so to adjust their expertise in order to face the growing needs of the public. In the meantime, globalization accelerated, suffocating us with the processes of entropy while reformers of heritage were put under even more pressure: a desire for nostalgia (because people started to like the good old days more and more) and profitability (as business seeks to earn on it). It looks like we are experiencing a cult of the past that no civilization except ours has ever known. The only thing this could be compared to is possibly the Greek Olympus that instead of being a spiritual superstructure became a spiritual escape; a getaway for a civilisation in decline.

### **Part of the problem**

**Museums are mostly achieving a static quality:**

**they are able to maintain certain notions  
of what quality used to be**

**or,**

**they seemingly protect them  
by insisting on conservatism  
and resisting change.**

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<sup>183</sup>depending upon the country, region and local circumstances



So, understanding museums as places that past has permeated and where it is worshiped is rather a prevalent popular notion but one with deep roots that reach modern times. Gertrude Stein was known to have said that a museum can either be a museum or modern, -in no way could it be both. If one remembers that most of the curators working in museums were never trained for the (highly specific and socially strategic) job they are doing, it becomes easier to understand certain naïve and lay attitudes that they have retained. Contrary to the modern, sufficiently understood role of museums, many curators are reflecting conservative attitudes: they do not believe that they can moderate change and so they fight it or, at least, ignore it. Having been confronted with dramatic changes, museums feel a pressure to "freeze" anything they feel is endangered. The syntagm of sustainable development has hardly touched on museum thinking. They must assist change by moderating it. Indeed, more and more curators seem to cross over to their users and start treating the past as a sort of introspection that is necessary for the present.

### Should museums change?

**Depends upon answers:**

**Do we want a better past?**

(using museums to make more of it)

**or**

**Do we want better present and future?**

(using the past for quality development)

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The past is important inasmuch as it serves the noble needs of the present and helps build favourable conditions for the future, nothing more. Therefore, it's not only syntagm indicating that museums are there for the "preservation of our past". This is an incorrect and unsatisfactory simplification and it implicitly deprives heritage institutions from their function to serve the present and assist the future. The past is gone and lost in the same way that the future is unknown. Yet, if museums are about value systems, we could work out a plausible analysis of the past and propose an equally relevant project of the future. The collective agreement upon that culture then requires (real) democracy as the rule of noble reason.

## 20. Excessive architecture and design

“Every design concept has an interpretive message”<sup>184</sup>. So when does design become imposing and self-promoting? In design, like in architecture, less is usually more, but an exceptionally good design and architecture work together with the contents in order to form the meanings. Museum contents are like works of art: some need frames and pedestals others are inhibited by them. Museum Beelden am Zee<sup>185</sup> and Museon in The Hague, are excellent examples of effective, humble, museum friendly, architecture and design. They are the work of an architect who was experienced in industrial architecture where vanity has no place. A gallery in Colonial Williamsburg was created to be specifically humble and modest, almost self-denying (at least from the outside) and therefore in solemn harmony and accordance with the context<sup>186</sup>. I.M. Pei or D. Chipperfield, to name just a few of exceptional authors, seem to be impeccable examples to justify the claim that sensitivity for the harmony of aesthetics and function can be achieved.

<sup>184</sup> Ambach, Gordon. Museum News, December 1986.

<sup>185</sup> The architect of both, as well as other additional museum projects was Wim Quist, who was not after personal glory but driven by the quality of the projects.

<sup>186</sup> De Witt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery, built by Kevin Roche.

## Interiors and signage

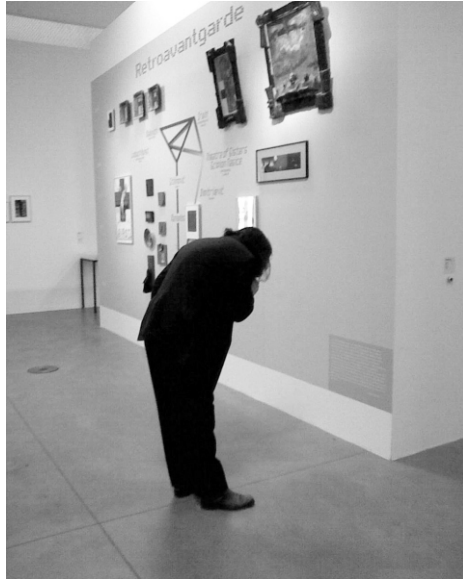
Beautiful and expensive showcases often become more important than the objects they contain. The look of a certain space, its decoration and equipment can become intrusive, and their presence and arrangement can render the exhibits hardly visible. Numerous museum buildings have also become so prestigious that the exhibitions, and other museum functions, are pushed into the background. The reasons for this mistake stem from ignorance of the possibilities and the requirements of one's own profession and submissiveness to power, such as the interests and arguments of designers and architects. The names of eminent individuals can generate enormous reverence and so the defeat of the museum profession is camouflaged under expensive projects. It is no secret that some of the most venerated museums are places that tourists visit for the sake of their architectural prestige alone.

## Captions

In the same way, the text labels in exhibitions can quite literally become illegible if, for instance, white letters are printed on a transparent sheet which is then applied to a glass showcase.



Text captions are often either too small, placed too low or high or positioned in some other way that makes them barely discernable.



It is customary in Western Europe and North America to have a high standard of labels and captions, and that may encourage the belief that tourists are no longer prepared to visit museums without labels in a number of foreign languages. It is no longer acceptable to have captions glued to the frames of paintings or, as I have discovered recently, stuck in the corner between the painting and the frame. Although this doesn't necessarily prohibit labels being copied directly from the catalogue: the registration number, dimensions, year of creation/accession etc. Some labels still say too much, some say too little, some tell us things that are of little or no concern and others say it in languages we simply cannot comprehend.



In some museums captions and text labels do not exist at all, while in others they form a text cluster that “refers” to some arrangement of objects located beside it.

## **Overdesign**

Most of the works that get into a museum were never subjected to this "antiseptic" atmosphere before that point. The perfect lights, super-cleanliness, white, sterile walls and ceilings, -it's a stark contrast to the environment of its creation and intermediary life. This trend, which is unnecessary art work and certainly unnatural to the eye and spirit, has become so implicit that it is now an obligatory expectation. Balance is the solution and antidote to overdesign, and in particular, to the obnoxious and imposing characteristic. If you visit certain museums and the showcase design imposes on you immediately, there is a problem. The most significant part of that problem is that the means has become the objective.



**Glass case flooring: expensive, illegible and awkward**

How should we exhibit the paintings of M. Rothko in the best possible way? Designers may have thought that the overwhelmingly grey colour of the gallery walls posed the best solution. Instead, the works were gasping for air, and it did seem to me<sup>187</sup> that the design was working against the exhibitions rather than for it. I remember seeing some museums where the architecture and design would be a permanent help to the communication aspect, a sort of convenient, secure shelter<sup>188</sup>. Curiously and paradoxically, many artists adapted their studios to resemble the space of a contemporary art museum<sup>189</sup>.

<sup>187</sup>In 2002 there was a major show in London where I saw this solution as a lack of curatorial input.

<sup>188</sup>Musee Romain de Lausanne-Vidy, Lausanne, Switzerland.

<sup>189</sup>The end of the 19th century gave legitimacy to an art created solely with the aim to be exhibited in museums, so, indeed, new can only be the proportions of certain phenomena.

Design has taken over in many cases. Designers of exhibitions commonly take a leading role in developing and managing the interpretive proposal, instead of curators. Significantly, some designers impose so much on the process that a text explaining their design approach is included in the exhibition catalogue, while others prefer to focus more on visual impact than visibility.



The museum in question is a very good one, but can you imagine reading all of this?

The aim of design is to remain a means of communication and not to add distractive content. Jokes are meant to make us laugh and think, but only bad jokes need to be explained and, thus, they deconstruct themselves and disqualify their authors in the process.



## Signage

"Art museums in particular, minimize signage, wall text and labels, so that the graphics and text do not interfere with visitor's experiencing the works of art"<sup>190</sup>, says an author from the marketing domain, without adding that they often do so in their excessive exaggerations. Contemporary art museums lead this practice of aesthetic purity which, to a normal visitor may provoke uneasiness. Namely, the tendency toward brutal reductivism, some hermetic mode of design that tries hard to be imperceptible and it is gaining notoriety with the rising snobbism that accompanies contemporary art. In some quite well known museums, a sign for the toilet is a "letraset" that is applied to a white wall in a ridiculously pale shade of grey and therefore becomes almost invisible, for the sole purpose of leaving the whole aura of complete whiteness uninterrupted.

Sometimes it is the sheer amount of information, in terms of orientation in a museum, that is so overwhelming and intrusive that it confuses, rather than guides people: doorways and corridors are overloaded with directional signs (XX. ctr., 18th century, exit, prehistory, toilets, local history collection, collections referred to by the names of their donors...) as well as all sorts of additional information on text boards, diagrams, in models, axonometric schemes and so on. Complex diagrams and axonometric plans that attempt to explain the levels of a museum through superimposed layouts that are

<sup>190</sup>Kotler, Neil; Kotler, Philip. *Museum Strategy and Marketing: Designing Missions, Building Audiences, Generating Revenue and Resources*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1998. p.201

marked with different colours and signs are intended to present the contents of a museum and to enable visitors to orientate themselves through it. Most of this information, however, is beyond the comprehension of the average visitor.

I have seen numerous museums, even in these very days, which contain glass cases with objects and use the very same approach for the captions: a folio with text in black or some other colour that is applied directly on the glass. The shine of glass against the background makes reading the words placed on top of it a very hard job, and quite impossible for any visitors who do not have perfect vision. Many museums still require us to bow right down and almost kneel in order to see the captions that were placed by the designers<sup>191</sup>.

The ways in which certain museum interiors are conceived reveals designers' and architects' fascinations within the often obtrusive vocabulary of (especially) postmodern architecture. Long and narrow corridors, vertiginous "vertical penetrations" span many floors of the building, "flying" staircases hang high in empty spaces, strong architectural elements that impose themselves as the contents instead of the container - all of them and more, are sins committed by architects who are often more focussed on leaving their strong personal contribution than to serve the delicate and creative working process that is supposed to be taking place in any heritage institution: the transfer of collective experience. Any decision made in a museum which relates to architecture and

<sup>191</sup>I will refrain from mentioning the museums and exhibitions where this is the case, as they may have changed in the interim.

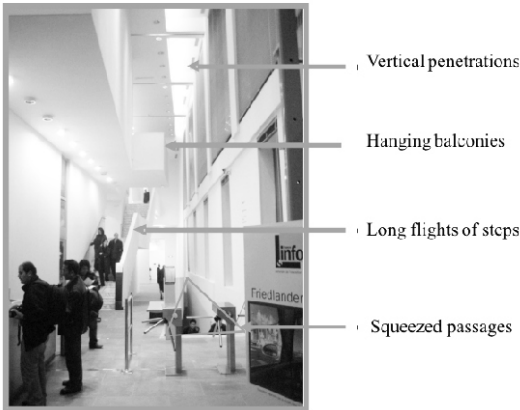
design especially, impacts on it for the good or bad. Consideration toward the visitors is shown in a myriad ways, some even at the subliminal level, but some in more obvious ways such as by putting information like, for example, the duration of the audio-visual show, at the entrance of the auditorium. Professionalism is like love: it is made up of the constant flow of little bits of proof that testify to devotion and care. Everything else is pretension or incompetence.

### **Architecture**

ICOM's 3rd General Conference took on the theme of museum architecture<sup>192</sup>. That was an early sign of awareness that might one day see it turn into a dominant feature of museums. Architects are turning into a very influential profession and that is good, but with it goes the temptation to be innovative and trendy at any price and anybody's expense. The post-modern architecture with its standardized *a la mode* language, whenever uncontrolled, gave little chance to anything but itself often at the expense of comfort, spacial readability and ease of circulation.

Architecture has been imposing from its very beginnings, and has proceeded to work itself into the content more and more. As a result of the importance of iconic attractions and emblematic features of cities, it has soared in importance, to the extent of becoming obtrusive. There are some contemporary art museums that were better when they were empty. The reason is

<sup>192</sup>6-12 July 1953., Genoa, Milan and Bergamo, Italy, Problems of museums located outside; problems of museums in undeveloped areas; the architecture of museums and museums in modern town-planning.



This is a famous museum in Paris, but is it a comfortable one?

simple: they were created as architecture and design projects; as empty buildings<sup>193</sup>. A beautiful, well equipped luxury space is no more a guarantee for a good museum than a beautiful musical instrument would be for a good music. Creative expertise will be the ultimate requirement that, indeed, only gets better in ideal conditions.

One might claim that the architects of contemporary art museums have conditioned the taste of the public so much that they get away with their opulence. Corbusier was a predecessor, of sorts, to the grand architectural egos who were ever ready to impose strong authorship for public use<sup>194</sup>.

<sup>193</sup>Richard Mayer's museum in Barcelona was the object of my spontaneous questionnaire that was put to ten local museum curators who were present at both openings. They all agreed that the museum left a better impression before the works of art came in. Another example is The Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal;

<sup>194</sup>His project for Paris centre is notoriously good example but so is the project for National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, moderated however by his Japanese collaborators.



Museums should be comfortable, effortless, if not cosy places

But the greatest master of risk in this respect is by far D. Liebeskind, - imposing on the contents in his museums in a way that simply cannot be rebuked: even when overdoing it, he remains convincing<sup>195</sup>. It often seems that the museum, with all its contents, is reduced to an excuse for showing off the power of the investor and the vanity of the architect. Most new contemporary art buildings are open first as buildings and only second as museums, - with the contents and the process. The representative notion of the art museum building has gained so much media and cultural attention that the building itself, obligatory and iconic - the prestigious feat of a celebrity architect - bears much, if not the same, importance as the collection (or the programme) that will eventually settle in it. This is not wrong by definition, but it

<sup>195</sup>Could his architecture be called "frozen music" (as Goethe was calling architecture)?

demonstrates how far the very professional job of the museum has fallen out of the reach of the curators. Whoever thinks about introducing visual literacy as the most important mission of those museums? They would rather stick to the notorious concept of great central spaces and genius gestures in order to make a project unique. It is becoming highly incompatible with their cult status, which is mainly promoted by the false elites, and their snobbish preference for shallow mythology. Again, the profession-*in spe* is at loss and the users even more so, as it's their money that was again invested in false elites. One has to agree; that in such situations it's better to let those projects happen at the whim and expense of corporative business, because the public money should be redirected into direct aid for the visually barbarised population. Back when I was a consultant, I remember coming across a museum where the architect who was in charge of refurbishing the 17th century palace which housed the city museum, had put blinds on all the windows and blocked out the view of surrounding buildings that were from the same architectural period. Instead of



connecting the past and present realities and playing on their similarities and contrasts, it simply shut off from them.

Yet, some projects demonstrate a happy coincidence in remarkable, highly iconic and yet suitable, buildings that are able to accommodate a balance between urbanism, function and architectural aspiration<sup>196</sup>. What the Guggenheim in New York was at one time, the Guggenheim Bilbao became years later: a building with its own privileged extravagance. The New Acropolis Museum represents a good balance of fulfilled requirements. Architects belong to an established profession, even if it is rather arrogant at times. Some museum buildings receive awards despite the fact they are quite impractical and sometimes make the working process itself almost impossible<sup>197</sup>. The failure, owing to the lack of professionalism on the part of curators, leaves architects too wide a scope and the outcome is that they are allowed to create any type of building<sup>198</sup> that does not necessarily reflect the specific purpose, place or contents<sup>199</sup>. On the other hand, any curator would know that any museum is, by definition, a very specific place with specific circumstances and a

<sup>196</sup>Though controversial in many reports, the Guggenheim Bilbao is an example of ones of these happy coincidences.

<sup>197</sup>Stadtmuseum Hofheim and Taunus, in Germany, gained two awards but is an example of this case. Another, though it seems not to have been awarded, is the Kunstmuseum in Wolsburg, Germany and still another is the Motherwell Heritage Centre in the UK.

<sup>198</sup>Arata Isozaki has created an excellent building for the Domus-Casa del Hombre, la Corogne, in Spain. That example shows, however, that when museums change towards communication (outsourcing research and conservation) their agenda may require another image.

<sup>199</sup>An architect completely destroyed the atmosphere of the former factory: Rheinisches Industrie Museum, Ratingen, Germany.

particular character. That deserves to be made visible. Sir John Soane created a museum that perfectly represents his particular fascination with past, mausoleums and death. Again, some may try too hard and end up, if not with the wrong building, then with one that is too expensive<sup>200</sup>. Some may turn out like an underground station; white well or indeed, a snail's shell<sup>201</sup>. Many famous architects, who have acquired respectable reputations and were commissioned for numerous museum projects, became more renowned for their imposing and impractical designs<sup>202</sup>. Those who show off, use space carelessly, select excessively expensive or exotic materials<sup>203</sup>, ignore the needs of the museum's working process or destroy the value in the monumental quality of the museum that they were supposed to integrate.

Although most remarks on the physicality of museums will concern design, the overall framework will reflect the architecture. Architecture should be what clothes are to a person: providing the body with protection and comfort and assisting to create a favourable image, but also reflecting the true identity of the owner. The same goes for the abundance of big, prestigious architectural projects. Encouraged by

<sup>200</sup>Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Ottawa, by Douglas Joseph Cardinal, OC, Canadian architect (1934)

<sup>201</sup>That was the case of Louis Kahn's Kimbel Art Museum, though it was lit mostly with natural light (!), P. Johnson's Art Museum in South Texas, or F.L. Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York.

<sup>202</sup>The perfect example is Musee d'Orsay and Museum of Art of Catalunya, while imposing architecture on the landscape and dominating the collection, so is the Arken Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen. As well as the MAXXI - National Museum of the 21st Century Arts, in Rome.

<sup>203</sup>I remember a small museum in Zamora, Spain, where an amount of precious and exotic hatoba wood was used for no obvious reason. Yet, if I am not wrong, a truly harmful project for the rain forests was the new National Library of France.



destination branding and pressures from tourism, city governments increasingly believe that only emblematic and prestigious projects with grand architecture and appeal have a chance at competing in the stakes. That may be the case at the moment, but in the long run, not many will survive on sensational buildings, which are expensive capital investment, slow on returns and demanding to maintain. The durable and sustainable strategy would again be based upon manageable and rational property, with quality programmes and pre-determined beneficial impacts, first of all, being improvement to the quality of life for the local community.

I believe there are more and more museums that do not need this critical response, as their practice is impeccable. The jewels, like Dulwich Picture Gallery, are notorious for mastering the use of space and light, but, many are now outside the usual geographical coordinates<sup>204</sup>, and happily so. But countless others for example, invest in too much marble, whereas the money could have been better spent on their programme. It would be unfair to mention them, because, as a result of the tense cooperative efforts of curators on one side and the designers and architects on the other, it is the curators who lose the battle. Architects and designers belong to their respective profession(s) and gain all the more power that comes from that. Rightfully and fairly, many architects complain that their brief was such that most of the

<sup>204</sup>The Antalya museum in Turkey is a place where architecture brings the sculptures to life while the light is masterfully managed.

decisions were left to them. Planning in museums is usually only carried out through the materialisation of matter through the design of a space and then by articulating its contents. Most of it should depend upon conceptualisation which is done by the curators. It has become impossible to decide whether museums are the places of noble contemplation and reflection<sup>205</sup> or vivacious communication. If they can be both, then so much the better, but any museum should have a programme that conditions the final architectural and design solutions.

The design of the interior space of the National Museum of Modern Art in Beaubourg, was heavily criticized and then changed in response to that criticism. But the very possibility of changing testified to the positive quality of the project's flexibility. Therefore, in a world so open to change, flexibility will remain one increasingly valuable virtue. The iconic language of architecture will remain simple if we remember that any architectural solution is also a message or a condition for one: that the intimacy of descent (conveyed through steps) will always be opposed to the arrogance or fallacy of ascent, which is important when considering what we want to suggest to those who come in<sup>206</sup>. Indeed, when museums started to care for passers-by, and for their reality, their entrances were put on the street level and a view inside into the contents of the building was made possible. The paradigmatic case of the Centre G. Pompidou

<sup>205</sup>Huin, S. Declaration. Musee Departemental des Vosges et Musee International de l'Imagerie, Epinal, 8 Jan. 1988.

<sup>206</sup>Indeed, besides Louvre, there are many museums that are entered in such a way (former Museum of Yugoslav Cinemateque, Mauritshuis...).

with the entrance(s) at the very end of the descending platform, close to the facade, changed the ways of considering the users forever. A heritage institutions' architecture can profit from new ways of thinking but it can also be a victim to the idea of nostalgia outwitting the transience that torments those very same institutions. We see, however, that transience is as valid as any enduring form of persistence. As the busy cities of today are becoming increasingly difficult to live in, museums often correctly understand their role as offering an oasis of peace and meditative respite through their galleries and (newly) covered courtyards. Traditional, prestigious museums were culture on a pedestal and so was the approach to them<sup>207</sup>. Modern museums, at their best, similar to cathedrals in the Middle Age (and unlike Greek, Roman and Renaissance temples), became persuasive machines.

<sup>207</sup>Metropolitan in New York, National Gallery in Washington, Art Institute of Chicago, Tretyakov Gallery and Pushkin Museum in Moscow etc.)

## 21. Overspecialisation

Permanent exhibitions in specialized museums are usually a nightmare for most visitors. Large quantities of like objects, with subtle differences that can only be of interest to experts and connoisseurs, present an impenetrable barrier to the good will of visitors. Specialized information always attracts a learned minority, so specialized museums should really employ introductions, references and conclusions in an effort to overcome the limitations of their discourse and to make visitors more interested.

Contrasting values and unacknowledged interrelations seem to prevail, even if the real, integral, symbolic or educational meaning of an object is totally different. Museums often assume attitudes that are reminiscent of monasteries from the Middle Ages, in the way they were so concerned with relics that embodied or reflected aspects of religious and holy life: boiling down the dead in cauldrons and then bickering over which parts would belong to which monastery or be exchanged for other accolades. To again refer to the example of exhibiting one part of an altar here and the other there, testifies to an inadmissible lack of cooperation and professional solidarity in owning and presenting the parts of a once existing whole. Having been disbanded through the trafficking works of art by

greedy collectors and continued by competition between institutions, this approach has certainly transferred into the spatial disposition. The Centre Georges Pompidou was aiming towards "interchangeability and transparency", which was a splendid achievement and ahead of its time, but in practise it translates into compartmentalization<sup>208</sup>, decisive division of functions (the public library acquired an entrance behind the building which separated it from the museum and other buildings), and more rigid design of the spaces so that the museum was beginning to acquire the look of a traditional museum.

Specialist museums sometimes take the form of fetishist shrines, rather than public institutions that are truly interested in interpreting the world for the benefit of the public. Vast numbers of quasi identical objects may well serve a scientist or a similar kind of professional, but they are simply a bizarre idea to any democratic, let alone social, aspirations. They mostly demonstrate a total inability to move away from their immediate fascination, from a phenomenological to a conceptual level, in order to gain meaning and win appreciation. A museum of combs is close to ridiculous but it could be turned into a museum of hair-styling and hair care, and that could not only bring, but also provide, sponsors whose commerce is founded upon it. They insist upon specialization without recognising the potential to create a functional, interchangeable whole simply by bridging the conceptual gap with basic professional training.

<sup>208</sup>Lumley, Robert. *The Museum Time-Machine*. Routledge, London, 1988. p.211

A director of a technical museum, a rather old fashioned one at that, once asked what kind of professionalism he should envision for the institution. In a symbolic sense, the authentic, truly professional character should have entered the museum the moment they employed an art historian; somebody who was able to evaluate and communicate their various collections of household objects, older collections and so on, according to their aesthetic, social and economic values, with the aim to better serve and understand the phenomena. That generates a professional attitude and, consequently, a museum that is usable.

The modern museum visitor is constantly searching for answers in a place where they assume that the information is adequate and reliable, but there are few museums who really offer that. Some natural history museums have changed the museum world for the better, but many of them will tell the story of whales without once making reference to the implications of the technological age with the countless impacts it has on the species: that they have the potential to be exterminated not only by excessive whaling, but as a result of the sound frequencies and waste that pollutes the ocean. They indirectly ask, as if we are children lost in the chaos of fading values, why we would care at all for these apparently "expensive", giant man eaters. Shall we just give up upon our motives for reading "Moby Dick"? If we don't hurry up Captain Ahab will become just an obsessed old lunatic who risked his job, his expensive ship, his life and that of his crew, only to kill a white sperm whale.

## 22. Scientifism

Scientifism is defined as an overestimation of science, its force and its arguments. Life is too complex to be neatly shaped to scientific disciplines and specialist frameworks and it is always at loss at being exposed to such a Procrustean bed. Any life phenomenon that is forced to conform to a standard or set of conditions (like inside a museum) which are determined arbitrarily, will, like the travellers from the legend of Procrustes, perish. They do it as a result of losing communicational quality and by causing cognitive dissonance with most users.

### MEPHISTOPHELES

And after first and foremost duty Of  
Metaphysics learn the use and beauty!  
See that you most profoundly gain  
What does not suit the human brain!  
A splendid word to serve, you'll find  
For what goes in or won't go in your mind.  
But first, at least this half a year,  
To order rigidly adhere;  
Five hours a day, you understand,  
And when the clock strikes, be on hand!  
Prepare beforehand for your part  
With paragraphs all got by heart,  
So you can better watch, and look

That naught is said but what is in the book:  
Yet in thy writing as unwearied be,  
As did the Holy Ghost dictate to thee!<sup>209</sup>

Some years ago, when this book was initially conceived, a rather famous editor-in-chief of an equally famous museological magazine claimed in a public lecture that educational activities should be developed separate to the main activities of the museum, or even outside it. He then proceeded to deal with what he deemed as the more important questions of long and short term publications and progressed on to assert that labels were a top priority of scholarship<sup>210</sup>.

Scientifism can do a lot of harm if it is undertaken in a manner that makes it difficult to challenge or dispute, or rather, through an insistence that everything one does or says must be firmly anchored in the achievements of one's predecessors and only with expert insight that is earned through decades of diligent research. What could be wrong with that? At times, everything: this approach may prevent fresh thinking and, if it does not, the sheer exhaustion caused by hard work and too much responsibility can be deadly. I do not deny that science may be taken solely as just that, but combined with a little more adventurism, guesswork, intuition and reference to everyday human experience, it could be saved from sterility. The prevalent conservative, dare I say,

<sup>209</sup>A quotation from Faust, by W.A. Goethe;  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm#IV>

<sup>210</sup>Back in 1999 the director of the Zeppelin museums introduced me to their "golden mill": a thin charming lady, a poet by vocation, whose task was to "translate" all the labels that were proposed by the scientific staff. The lecture I am referring to happened at an international symposium, in 2001, Zagreb, Croatia.



scientific practice of science, is still a dominant medium in most museums. But, museums and other heritage institutions are the mediums of life; science is only an obligatory underlying characteristic, not the contents or the summary of what they do. "Do" is used intentionally here, as the most we were previously able to strive for was "communicate", instead of inform and provide knowledge. In a typical scientific text, any assertion, even of the most obvious or simple kind, is burdened with brackets that sometimes contain more than ten references to authors who support, agree or have said the same thing. Influenced by that same "obligatory" and rigid attitude, heritage institutions (especially those who consider themselves predominantly scientific in character)<sup>211</sup>, make communication difficult and imply that active engagement is, apparently, not their concern. Facing the public, creating public discourse and engaging the community requires courage. Perhaps it does not inspire outward admiration, but to do it in an effective way, one has to be committed.

Some shortcomings of  
the exclusive scientific discourse

- No time, resources and willingness to propose firm claims and assertions
- Lag behind the real-time context
- Unintelligible language
- Exclusive orientation on positive knowledge
- "Fach"- approach; theoretical and detached

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<sup>211</sup>Obviously, understanding oneself as public and popular should not mean non-scientific and non-credible.

## **The foreign language**

In order to explain the origins of civilization and culture in our museums, what we are usually offered is a three-dimensional handbook that is geared more to students of archaeology and ethnology. Admittedly, it is uninteresting and boring; obviously, no visitor or even a mere passer-by is going to benefit greatly from the experience. In times past, having stayed as distant as possible, we have only rarely demonstrated that our 90 billion predecessors, who were just like us, are relatives and ancestors that we can learn from. They provide insight through a language which is not part of any particular profession, but that of life and its circumstances.

### **Some advice on ways of communication**

a popular narrative on the basis of scientific discourse

- **Use of simple language**
- **Inclusion of concrete characters**
- **Inclusion of the emotional, the philosophical, the humanist, the unknown...**
- **Ethical concern**
- **Social responsibility**
- **Reference to real-time and real-life situations**
- **Useful methods of participation and interaction with society**
- **Use of art and artists in communication design**

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When Eco describes the monastery in his famous novel 'The Name of the Rose', he exposes the fear of its inhabitants in the valleys, where the spirit of sanctity cannot dwell, and where people not only speak, but also write in a vernacular language; they wish and hope that they never enter their walls. In the heritage

domain, a similar thing happened with museums in the sixties, when they were understood to be educational institutions<sup>212</sup>. The language of conventional museums, with their diagrams and divisions of departments, rooms and exhibitions which no lay person could fully understand or follow, remind us of the conservative liturgy of the church, There the faithful act out of a belief that they are following a secret process that will reinforce their connection to God. Diagrams are rarely really useful in explaining the phenomenon, and they usually only depict basic attempts by curators to communicate abstract knowledge. Any consistency referenced through diagrams is largely exaggerated because life itself lacks regularity and symmetry. Evolution occurred in leaps and bounds of development that were irregular and in many ways, accidental.

### **Research orientation**

Conventional, traditional museology had lamented over the obvious trend that museums were turning away from their collections towards their public. It was understood as an imbalance, recalling nostalgically to the time when a museum's reputation was based upon impeccable research and the great scientific figures who worked in them. To claim that museums were scientific institutions *par excellence* was an apriorism. There is little evidence of that reality surviving around us. Although we have examples of museums who successfully returned former ideals, mostly among the natural history museums, it will remain a temporary and partial reclusion. Research

<sup>212</sup>Later on, it became clear that their task is much more complex and specific.

has become a highly specialized, expensive job that most museums will not be able to afford to carry out to any substantive quality, nor will they be able to compete with the standards of research in other respective institutions. Are museums immanently scientific, research institutions; is there a research function to their collections? This has become the big question that, for many, remains unanswered. Are museums the creators and disseminators of knowledge, or do they have a higher objective? Unlike any other institution, museums have to break the barriers between the "exact" and "social" sciences because this is the only way reality can retain the quality of entirety.

However, questions around whether research can survive and persist may well be addressed, but its place in the mind is always reflected by the character of exhibition galleries. Many museums changed their mentality and so changed their exhibitions. Some testify to change being apparent, but demonstrate the opposite. Why on Earth would any average visitor, in fact any visitor who isn't an expert, wish to see hundreds of birds that all appear to look the same, or hundreds of broken pots, or other accumulations of similar objects which only excite connoisseurs with their subtleties of difference? There is no reason for that, apart from a lingering persistence of the scientific mentality.

“Scientific objectiveness” has been the steady ambition of research. Yet, its contemporaneity was so exposed by ever renewing assessments and questioning that even the so called exact sciences fell short of achieving their ideal. Many are now ready to

admit to this fact<sup>213</sup> by revealing the divergent elements which were concealed, subjective approaches which were disguised, emotions veiled, the whole picture fragmented...

### **Protagonists of victorious civilisations**

Many museums are still dwelling upon the false myths of omnipotent science, on the superiority of man over nature, on the superiority of his knowledge, on a rationalist dream that gave rise to the myth of progress. With the emergence of *sustainability* as an approach in many areas of human endeavour, it may seem that the myth has finally been shattered. And yet it will not, in fact, be deconstructed any time soon because the entire institutional sector still functions as a legitimate expression of the world that lives, of our constant expansion and constant conquest of new resources. Progress has been assigned the moral characteristic of advancement and shielded the “brave, combative” efforts of the power generating structures of society. Instead, it should have ensured a consistent rise in the quality of living, working to avoid conflicts or keep the air and water bodies clear. Once it is obvious that progress has become synonymous with the poisonous mud that our world may well be sinking into, museums have to assure at least their public, if not their tax payers, that they are on the right and good side. The problem is not a simple one: "faith in progress is usually implicit in desires to improve the past"<sup>214</sup> - not

<sup>213</sup>Fabietti, Ugo; Malighetti, Roberto; Matera, Vincenzo. *Od lokalnog do globalnog*. Clío, Beograd, 2002. P.102,103

<sup>214</sup>David Lowenthal, at „The Best in Heritage“ conference in his key-note speech, Dubrovnik, Croatia, 2005.

the future, as it may seem. The bigness also contributes to the bureaucracy, as buildings and collections continue to grow. In the late 1980s, UNESCO, when I used to know its inner workings well, was an epitome of institutionalism. Any activity was, in fact, only a by-product of its dealings with itself. It's hard to believe that things have changed radically since then. Most similar international bodies are composed of the representatives that are *vrhushka* members, awarded with sinecure by their home establishment, for different political services or the like.

The few centuries of humanism came about from mankind's fascination with its superiority over nature. Once we become aware of its entropic effects, we see, in the most dramatic way, that we are only a part of the natural order (though the most dangerous part, it's true). Our ever increasing knowledge has, however, only ever been used to destroy the *homeostasis*, that fine balance between opportunities and threats. In the new syntagm of *post-humanism*, its arguments may now contribute to the constant redefinitions of the place of humankind within the Universe.

### **Temples of science, knowledge or communication**

The term "material evidence" is used to explain what museums contain. It refers to the objects and reveals a sort of aberration. There, history and culture are treated similar to the results of a scientific experiment, in that they must always be proven. Yet, the choices inherent in collecting, or in their very interpretation (though entrusted to science), depreciates this claim to the extent of denial. Instead, through the broad overview that is afforded by wisdom deriving from past human experiences of culture, civilisation or

nature, we have gained a collection of bureaucratic evidence, like something in a judiciary hearing. In the absence of any true protagonist, the main witness is the respective scientific discipline.

Museums are still perceived as elitist places and many, in spite of innovation in practice and changes in public perception, remain "of interest only to those who are initiated into the mysteries of these silent cathedrals of learning"<sup>215</sup>. In many countries "museum days" and "museum nights" have created an influx of annual visitors, who only venture in once a year. Yes, this encouraged people to get back in touch with museums but, needless to say, it changed very few practises in a lot of those museums. A real signal for change would be to offer a different product: one that is useful and in demand and improves the day to day realities of the community



.....but a sudden storm blew them off course and when it had died down they realized they were completely lost. They were relieved to see a man walking along

<sup>215</sup>McLean, Fiona. Marketing the Museum. London: Routledge, 1997. p.27

bellow and they shouted down to him, “Hello there! Where are we?”. The little figure on the ground shouted back, “You are in a balloon”. The two above, looked at each other and one said “he must be a museum curator”. “What makes you think that?” said the other. “Because the information he gave us is perfectly correct but totally useless!”<sup>216</sup>

A conventional museum will likely please a scientist or interest a student, but will also bore and discourage the layperson. The average visitor likes to discover things that are connected to reality so that they can relate it back to their own experiences and therefore appropriate a valuable sense of understanding and of having been informed. Knowledge for knowledge's sake does not and cannot achieve this. The safest formula for professional orthodoxy is the scientific framework, as it also preserves dignity beyond criticism relating to issues that are regarded as central concerns of the museum. Even though their activities should be based on scientific criteria, museums are not, except rarely, quintessentially scientific institutions. Although museums have a scientific base, they are producing more and more knowledge. However what we rightfully expect from them is more wisdom..

K. Hudson categorically criticised museums for becoming temples of science, stating that a scientist will react with the brain, rather than sentiment, and that most visitors are neither scientists nor intellectuals. This fact, he added, is something that

<sup>216</sup>I have originally presented this joke within the keynote lecture at the annual meeting of ICOM's International Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA), Paris, 6-12 July 1987.



When scientists  
describe  
my meal,  
I lose appetite



When poets  
describe  
my meal,  
I get hungry

A conventional museum would rarely mention the food, let alone the difference between the real food and the GMO one.

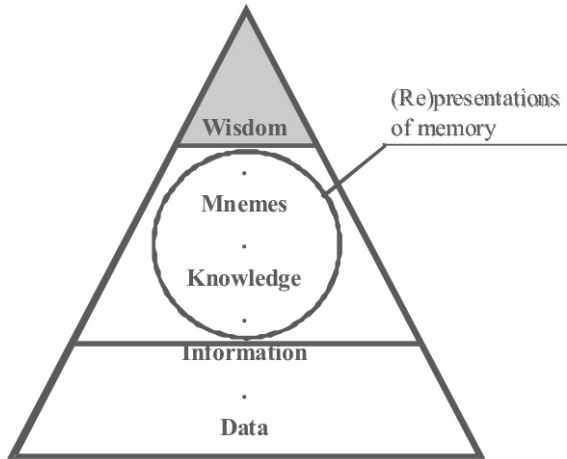
Texts © Tomislav Šola, 2007

museums have not been able to grasp for a very long time. If this seems to be a piece of criticism that is becoming less justified seeing that museums do change, there are still enough arguments to make objections: once it's turned into a public institution, the museum is bound to be democratic. So far, it has had to choose its democratic orientation with regard to the levels of information it could, or wanted to, diffuse. On one hand, the museum has been accused of its elitist approach and orientation toward the higher social classes, and of its populism which renounced ambition on the other. By using modern technology for researching, processing, storing and presenting information, the museum can function simultaneously, at multiple communication levels.

In an age which developed a new need for retaining memory, myths no longer presented recourse, and rather, everything needed to be proven by material facts. Learned societies were protagonists in the creation of the myth of science through their affirmation of analysis. As a result of the analytic

method, they often forgot the whole while being focussed on studying the individual parts. Their approach yielded elegant truths, but hid esoteric knowledge. Observation, experimentation and control, as the paths the lead to truth, are still recognised as the dominant agents of truth. Their inherent value will endure, but it is complemented by the humanist breadth of vision. Putting the needs of a community of users at the centre of, what were formerly exclusive scientific institutions, will change many of them. Their needs can be met by giving back to the discourse what was extracted during the process of analysis: the poetry of myths, emotional intelligence and the (art of) creative language which, taken as a whole, constitutes genuine communication. The presentation of reality, as it is done in museums, is not necessarily the only or the best way to do it. It can often happen that one learns more about the spirit of certain time or place from an extraordinary piece of theatre, than from visiting a museum. But a creative language built from facts and experiences is not forbidden territory. Many have access to it, having recognised that the future of public memory communication will grow with the consolidation of curators and artists. The belief that the public will evolve is an illusion, just as it is to think that they will educate themselves and agree to take on the conventional discourse of museums as their own. There is no point in ignoring popular beliefs as, even when they are wrong, they still represent a legitimate reality to work from, to work with, to work for and work against. To summarise, we must acknowledge it and take it into account as a decisive circumstance. Without its users, any museum is but a storage place for dead objects.

When discussing methods of communication, there is an art, above all others, that is often only inaccessible to the most talented and wise among us - simplicity. It is so very complicated to keep things simple!



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As for wisdom, it usually comes from those who have great knowledge and humanist ethics. Ethical ignoramuses are usually useless, but unethical authoritarians often become dangerous.

## **23. Opportunism, servitude, manipulation**

The world is in such desperate trouble that anybody who is capable of offering hope for a way out would quickly again attract attention and importance. This is why false prophets are again in abundance, and yet our dire situation dictates that any constructive solution has to be given a chance. It is much easier to join the establishment, to adjust and serve the powers that be, work out remunerative arrangements and, in brief, serve one's own selfish, institutional objectives rather than social or communitarian ones. Yet, sooner or later, all public institutions will inevitably be confronted by their public mission. The servile practice of following the powerful and influential stakeholders is a simple and, owing to a long procession of conformism, seemingly legitimate inclination. Many people have noticed that there is, in fact, an alternative that is possible to attain through professionalisation, - it's a long and winding road, but it's the right one to take.

### **Opportunism and servitude**

Most heritage institutions tend to respect past and present authorities, so it's only logical that they often reflect the attitudes and values of dominant groups. When their curators try to think critically, they always

come up against those in power who represent the dominant value system. Therefore, most of them are socially and politically conditioned to serve them as well as their conservative audiences, who want their heritage presented the way it used to be presented. When pressured by the preponderant power-groups in their transitional, developing or underdeveloped societies, museums and other heritage institutions are obeying state employees because they serve the aims of daily politics. At best, they are expelled from the societal reality by shrewdly appropriating a neutral and uninterested disposition.

At their worst, they align, more or less openly, with the political agenda, stir up traumatic memories of wars and atrocities not to learn from them, but to prolong the wars and continue the conflicts. These false elites are authoritative monsters of crisis (be it a war or transition) and they generate insecurity, fear and hatred in order to create the problem situations that are needed to cover their incompetence and criminal acts. Unfortunately, the entire world seems to be in transition because globalisation is a constant, aggressive change where the rules and the speed are dictated. In all of this, museums share a destiny with the entire scientific and educational sector, all of them being attacked by excessive privatisation. Therefore, doing nothing is already a sin, and obeying the power-holders is the end of civil ideals.

Museums and heritage will either break down and assume a futile and unproductive existence, or they will take an active role and become part of the wider solution. Namely, they can significantly influence the quality of life of their visitors and the quality of life

within their community by simply appropriating, partial, if not full independence, in their views and doings. Once they are placed outside the influence zone of society's ruling groups, heritage institutions are in a major crisis, but only from that position, can they negotiate their new societal position and acquire a new kind of popularity. Only through de-etatisation, which is a risky breakaway, will heritage institutions acquire the necessary public credibility. The state itself is no longer a guarantor of civil liberties and civil rights, nor does it provide security or shelter anymore for the whole non-profit sector. In fact, by encouraging private, non-profit initiatives, the state is delegating its own tasks to citizens which, of course, brings good and bad consequences. One of them is a lower regard for once self-comprising public heritage institutions. So, what seems impossible to avoid has to be embraced with open arms. The large conceptual leap that is required of all heritage institutions is to accept the inescapable consequence or, indeed, goal, and thus make it possible. We are heading towards new partnerships and new divisions in accomplishing our mission, in an astonishing new technological context. The former sins will be such an unnecessary burden on the way to a revelatory future: the age of heritage, following the age of museums.

### **Manipulation**

Any form of manipulation stems from tendentially using an artificial, hermetic language because it hides inadequacy, shortcomings or fallacies. Their servility and participation in social and political manipulation has allowed heritage institutions deny their own potential and nature which are just the opposite: one of

the most powerful means of ensuring a reliable experience.

The commonly resented theory of heritage, in fact, consists of condensed practical experiences, which may lead to long-term changes in the public service. It does not have to be, necessarily, about contesting political wrongdoings. If the institutions in a well organised network conclude that they do not pay any attention to the history and the values of labour, they may establish a museum that will make up for this deficiency by setting up an appropriate programme policy. In a world of depreciated labour it goes against the preferences of vendors of illusions, whether they come from politics or the media or dominant oligarchies. Though it's not hostile to any particular party, such a museum is impossible in many countries<sup>217</sup>. Therefore, servility, although it is not an inevitable destiny, is however, very much a response to the absence of professional training and a consequent lack of social conscience. Our feeble, disjointed profession is lacking empowerment and self-respect and that leads to submissiveness. It takes on any number of forms from shaky deals for sponsorship to a decision not to tackle politically controversial issues. To excuse them somewhat for their lack of bravery, one has to admit that every time they have done anything differently, they have been attacked by the mainstream media and persecuted openly by the authorities, stakeholders and interest

<sup>217</sup> Any praise of labour or history of workers' movement is outwardly regarded as communist or destructive in the most of transitional countries where capitalism happens not as an economic system but as a disastrous degradation of standards of social contract.

groups whose values were challenged<sup>218</sup> . Any institutional sector is vulnerable to such a syndrome. Religious institutions have never been what they proclaimed to be, but lately, these experts in staged correctness (while using their God's solemn words) openly used their influence as an instrument to lead some of the most disastrous conflicts that have ever occurred. The requirements of the modern world infuriated them to the brink of open engagement. Staying with this example, it could be said that the divine theory of these religions should be lived outside the shrines and temples. Likewise, museums, if and when they are reformed, have to be lived not (only) visited.

### **What do museums do?**

- Museums hardly record the human epos; if they do, it is often only one side of the story and the blame is imposed on the other.
- Museums like to praise conquests and victories as triumphs of national strength.
- They say nothing about who makes the Earth a place of continuous suffering

**Can each nation and each community finally take up their part of the blame and, having being purged by the truth, become better?**

**In museums? Hardly. Yet, it must be done**

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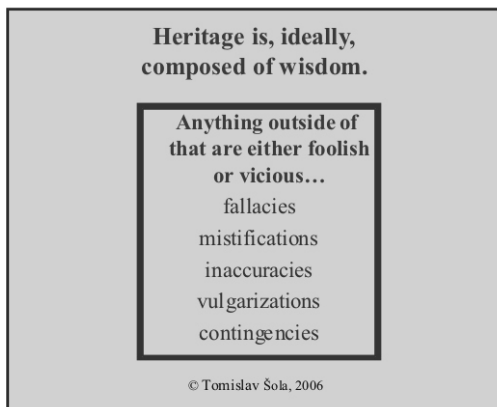
Museums only take on a truly sycophantic position when they are exposed to dictatorships, but that is understandable. Therefore, their servitude is relatively civilized in any civilized society as it is expressed

<sup>218</sup>Exhibition upon Enola Gay at Smithsonian Institution being proverbial case that ended by director being expelled from the job.



more by a withdrawal to the themes and activities that are unrelated to the worries of the present day. So museums, in most of the world, get media attention only when something is stolen from their collections, if they have a major problem, or if they are organizing one of those rare exhibitions which catch people's attention with their exclusive attributes. Self-censorship is, of course, a defect in the professional responsibility, at whichever level it occurs.

Whether it eventuates from opportunism, conformism or some social autism, museums seem to be directed by conventional minds. With the formidable exception of contemporary art museums<sup>219</sup>, other museums, almost as a rule, refuse to have any distinct role in evaluating their present. They will praise and glorify past geniuses, rebels and rule breakers, but will hardly ever extend out a hand to their like contemporaries. That is the limited reach of the knowledge paradigm.



<sup>219</sup> A museum of contemporary time is a wonderful oxymoron, a paradox that should spread all over the collective memory domain.

On the opposite hand, any kind of attempt to participate in reality, by recognizing the potentials of the 'here and now', would show a strong degree of wisdom. There is a huge space for evaluation between hypocritical restraint and an honest attempt to assist. This higher paradigm presents the ideal objective of public memory institutions. To prevent this development from taking place, heritage institutions still occasionally mention the necessity for a "historical distance". The claim is, that only after an appropriate amount of time that has lapsed do we have the ability to judge with a cool head. The truth is, that by this time the interests will be sediment and facts already filtered so that we shall be able to make anything at all out of the past reality. Historiographers are becoming more and more expensive as the state is withdrawing from the public sector, and, not without cynicism, one might claim that the corporate world is in need of more hagiographers instead.

## 24. Technologism: equipment

There is a certain frustration built around our responsibilities and our apparent inaptitude to fulfil them. So reacting to it on a mere technological level gives us the illusion that we are solving something. Puzzled by different possibilities and requirements, museums often take the technical escape, i.e. the one that can be created through mere physical change: top of the range glass display cases, the latest lighting solutions, the most prominent designers, the latest generation of hardware, the high-tech gadgets recommended by magazines or at trade fairs, the most prestigious buildings... Through such surrogate activity they are avoiding the responsibility of acting morally and creatively. You can learn a lot about a new director from the different elements he or she makes a priority; improving the conceptual or technical basis of the museum, for instance. It's always easier to find the money for new equipment over a long-term programme of professional education for staff. Good, daring directors are often quickly dismissed as they focus on what is often at the heart of the problem, so called human resources. A computer is of no help if it is not used with its implicit qualities (easy access to knowledge, communicational range, associative thinking, networking), but it may act as a soothing

sign of contemporaneity. With the latest generations of technology you can easily fascinate any number of key players in the professional scene, from sponsors to the public, from patrons to politicians, but, ultimately, technology has never created any masters in the trade. Even creating networks, that consist of museums and like institutions, using huge database systems is expensive and unnecessary if there is no requirement for cooperation or a multidisciplinary approach for research, etc. Before having a network, there's a need for implementation and developing a clear understanding around the objectives it should serve. New technologies and new organisations are too often used to perform old tasks, and as a result, only produce the old outcomes.

Architecture, design, technical equipment, communicational means, anything material and managerial that is used in the heritage institution working process may cumulatively produce a sort of fascination, a certain focus of energy around it, so that the genuine objectives of these institutions likely become the lower priority or second plan, or may even be partially forgotten.

There is constant pressure to change, but instead of working on the latent need to build in a philosophical basis to the professional mission, or for it to be renewed; the profession prescribes itself a makeshift cure by increasing the quantity of technical skills and new technologies. The changes come about through the need to adapt to the new requirements, but, in practice, it usually takes place through the simple process of changing their appearance. The result can sometimes be the destruction of the cultural tradition

of museums and sometimes a vain and fruitless investment which ends up seeing the same thing being done using new technology. Not being familiar with the true nature of the required change, heritage institutions venture into technological disguise, and, as they are not a true profession (in their training for the specific working environment, and other additional deficiencies) they are easily defeated by architects, designers, information engineers and development advisers.

## 25. Vanity

### **Eternity unattained**

The image of the museum as a place where objects, names and protagonists live on eternally with the assistance of three-dimensional material testimonies, is deeply rooted in our Occidental culture and civilization. But to expect eternity from the ephemeral physicality of things is an illusion: things do not have this ability, and nor should one expect them to. That is one aspect of vanity. People, that is, the majority, are encouraged by the media and other opinion makers, to follow a certain existentialist fever, in realising their materialist urges to the most extreme extent by satisfying and flattering their egos as much as possible. One thing a hypertrophied ego refuses to do is to die. So, museums celebrate human achievements to avoid the fear of death instead of teaching us how to face it. They do try to prove that physicality can indeed survive. The implications are not those of wisdom but of *ephemeral*. Thus, they join the thirst for eternity.

Part of the justified trend is collecting and communicating contemporary themes, from the real time with real protagonists. We started to value highly the chance of having the “future past” all around us and use it to avoid the subsequent intelligence to create



Sophia Loren entering her own exhibition  
(photo: AFP, New York Herald Tribune)

approximate or false meanings. What we are fundamentally interested in is, finally, our own time and circumstances. Of course, we thought correctly that past can be decisively instructive in that and will remain such. But, however, exhibitions and even museums about living people are strange unless we see them as temporary and processual in nature. The simple explanation is that there is no obligation for a “historical distance” as a precondition to offer an evaluation. Past has “caught up” with present. The accelerating time has put us into a capsule which is at the same time in all three time realities. As the reality is quickly ageing so it quickly transforms into the forms of future.

### **Monuments to the own ego**

So there is this curious “pharaonic” code in museums, whose champions are collectors and donors who erect museums and libraries and build their own monuments in an attempt to provide an eternity for themselves that will carry on their fame after they have gone. This explains why so many greedy Mammons of

the corporate world have bequeathed their immensely rich collections to "their nation", "their city", "their posterity"...It is a rather narcissist attitude that is perpetually dressed up in grand statements. These bequests to their venerable citizens and dearest nation; in grateful progeny as a guaranty for the eternal survival of the values that guided their enlightened and their noble and generous nature so that many others could enjoy and profit as well.... Those statements abound in formulations which, are not necessarily or entirely false, but are primarily there to provide the foundations for their monumental egos. Most of them do it out of vanity so that (at least) their name never dies. They require expensive buildings, financed with public money on which to put them. The wiser ones among them, in an act of public repentance, finance the buildings as well. To be fair, some of them just happened to be rich and their giving was unconditioned. Their names have been recorded in many ways by the grateful community. But the majority of those others stipulate in their contracts that their names remain there forever. Sometimes, they create the impression that they were talked into this egotism by their many thankful citizens and fans. Regardless, as noble as they were, they are still victims to this seemingly vainglorious proposal. Giving is noble, even if it is just giving back, but the names of these benefactors, with a few exceptions, as we've mentioned, are lists of the great priests of Vanity. To their posthumous satisfaction they have become unquestionable symbols of generosity<sup>220</sup>, whereas

<sup>220</sup>Vanderbilt, DuPont, Simon, Frick, Guggenheim etc.



social history remembers many of them as robber barons. There seems to be more sophistication and public commitment among major collectors now, but that is hard to generalize. Many others have their particular reasons for their occupation or passion, often they are very personal in nature and sometimes, rarely, they are motivated by the sheer enjoyment and pleasure that comes from curiosity or scientific interest<sup>221</sup>

### Aspects of vanity in heritage institutions

- Vainglory as excessive elation or pride over one's own achievements and abilities, self-indulge of the institution itself or the theme it is addressing
- Ostentation as pretentious displays intended to impress others through the preciousness and importance of objects
- Frustration with finiteness and mortality of anything physical
- Museums as ways of embellishing the biographies of donors and benefactors
- apology & protection of the official value system
- Protection of the existing order
- Belief in the stability and permanence of authoritative values
- The pretence of truth and objectiveness while washing over historical facts and events
- Futile belief in the eternity of physical matter
- Colonialism, segregation due to scientific curiosity
- Misinterpretation as a result of ignorance
- Museum sham: spurious imitation of a former reality, the false appearance of events, protagonists, context ...
- Museum complacency: self-satisfaction and self-indulgence: being unaware of inaptitude caused by changes in context

Tomislav Sola ©, 1997/2005

<sup>221</sup>"But, at the heart of the great collection, there perhaps lies a hole: an absence which the process of collecting can work to fill. Was collecting a sex-substitute for Peggy Guggenheim? Did paintings stand in for friends for the deeply unpopular Simon? Walter Annenberg's trophy acquisitions were like a family. They were his children, he said, and he wanted to see them every day. While for Nelson Rockefeller collecting was quite simply "the greatest recreation ever devised"."

[Http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/visual\\_arts/article2811648.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article2811648.ece)

Only very rarely, are there exceptions to the rule. There are truly generous donors out there that usually do not demand indemnity or propose terms to their gifts, let alone the condition that the institution comes to bear their name. Unlike the large majority of others, no matter how subtle their understanding of matter is, or how deep their comprehension of heritage is, they do it out of simple philanthropy. That is, however, very rare indeed, and the reason for that is probably in the fact that most generous people and most noble minds usually had no inclination or intention, or indeed, no power to amass rich and important collections.

### **There is nothing eternal about the physical**

Coming back to the other aspect of the "pharaonic" syndrome, we may wonder why it is that, after seeing the decomposition and decay of so many civilizations and cultures, heritage professionals still hold onto the illusion that all the museums with hundreds of millions of fragile, delicate objects are all consecrated to the cult of eternity: all those perishable objects are there on the assumption that they will survive against the laws of biology and physics. It has been demonstrated many times that the cost of maintaining this physicality is mounting and that not all of it will be preserved. In some cases, we may also wonder whether multiple restorations permit any serious claims of originality or authenticity. Of course, this is not to say that we should refrain from collecting, but it's certainly time to discuss the matter seriously.

### **The cost of intensive care**

Some years ago, one country made a nation-wide long-term policy on collecting that took these aspects

into account<sup>222</sup>. Will we have to, one day consider acts of intensive care and euthanasia? Of course not, but the overcrowded and dormant storage situation of museums is not a good sign, similar to a bank with all its assets stuffed into a single account. As museums and their bosses try to rationalize away their sense that something is wrong with museums, they impose on themselves higher and higher standards of collection care. Though it may sound offensive to the responsible carers in those institutions, museum objects live better than people they should serve. Conservation techniques have become so sophisticated that the costs of returning or keeping the objects in perfect condition are becoming unbearable. If and when it reaches the wider population, people that dispose "only" with common sense, will rightfully see museums as still another waste of their, taxpayer's money<sup>223</sup>. It will not help much to know the prices of weapons, which are relativizing any expenditure in culture, even the "intensive care" of valuable objects. But those budgets were never compared, nor were there any attempts to re-direct the money needed for one submarine<sup>224</sup> back to heritage care.

<sup>222</sup>The Collections for the Future report was the result of a major MA inquiry in 2004 and 2005, into collections and their use. The inquiry was chaired by Jane Glaister, who led a steering group which included some of the leading thinkers on collections from the UK and overseas (I was one of the members of the group). The efforts were continued with concerns on the wider use of collections.

<sup>223</sup>Lord, Barry; Dexter Gail; Nicks, John. *The Cost of Collecting: A Report* Commissioned by the HMS Office of Arts and Libraries, 1989.

<sup>224</sup>The cost of a Trident submarine is 1.8 billion dollars.

## **Mammon's love, or how Art is used to seduce Ms. Eternity**

When I first conceived it<sup>225</sup>, I named this "a fairy tale theatre piece on contemporary art collecting in 10 acts and 27 pictures " as it did occupy my mind as a set of theatre scenes. It seemed to cover most of the biographies of the grand collectors rather well; the barons of business, some of them assuming nickname "robber", to coincide, astonishingly, with the contemporary return of feudalism into tired Europe. Being the cradle of all the evils, Europe<sup>226</sup> was also the *origo* of all the utopia, - the most splendid of them, and the simplest in its utilitarian clarity, was the welfare society: the only proof and, and at the same time, the only condition that was indeed singled out for a democratic society.

### ***Time of brisk beginnings: the talented entrepreneur***

- Be a young shark: choose your lucrative business or activities or people or attitudes or methods solely for their financial return and work your way to the top: all that counts is the INCREASE. If this insatiable greed seems weird to others, ignore them, eliminate them, and take them over... Only the chosen ones can focus sharply on the Heaven of Profit, from the murky depths - it's the only heaven on Earth that is given solely to the daring.

<sup>225</sup>This was part of my lectures in Zagreb and internationally, in parts, since 2005. It was also as a proposal sent to a famous puppet theatre in Russia where we discussed about turning it into a play. In the meantime, (the ruling classes of) Russia, instead of using fresh eyes to express contempt for Western decadence to mock its decaying values, learned how to depreciate itself instead and fall into the most superfluous snobbism.

<sup>226</sup>United Europe, in fact, exists only as a mass of wrangling efforts that constitute a vision that is lost in the reality of the currently unipolar world. The drama that will follow will owe to the emerging new world powers who will take over.

- Build the Empire by eliminating the feeble, the reluctant, hesitant, scrupulous, frail and insignificant people and competitors; they are obstructing the ascent of your business empire; do it fiercely and ruthlessly: be convinced that the time will come when you will be deemed heroic.

- Rules are for those who need them.

***Time for Law and Order: the correct man***

When you have accumulated enough, make your business legitimate, so that everyone will know that you always do business correctly and in accordance with law.

***Time for Democracy: the tribune***

- Use conspiracy, lobbying and the media; coerce politicians, manipulate the public mind or, when you feel strong enough, attack the state openly in the name of democracy and the free market economy to weaken and impair the state and other public institutions; they are an obstacle to any sort of brave creativity or entrepreneurial spirit of the national economy;

- You represent the daring spirit of all those who were deprived and did not make it! The majority lives by its instincts and survives by identifying with people like you. They will always support you as long as you are successful: you are their wishful image, their projected alter ego, their bright path out of proscribed, stinking anonymity.

***Time for philanthropy: the benefactor***

- Help the feeble state, other bodies of public interest and mission and a chosen few among the NGOs from the non-for profit sector so that they become acquainted with your benevolence and

favourable disposition and consequently become receptive to the possibilities that you offer them;

- Make sure that the simple conditions you propose do not obstruct the image of the public benefactor;

***Time for sacrifice: Maecenas***

- Let your tender soul fly yet higher and make the decision to buy art: help the market prices rise as high as possible: this way everyone will see that you do not spare money when it comes to the important things;

- Encourage the creation of a fiscal system that introduces tax reductions for the purchase of art, so that the state, or its meagre taxpayers, will actually be buying it for you; this way you avoid prodigality and behave rationally;

- Help to rocket the prices of art further - all good deeds pay off: curiously, as the prices go up so too do the deductions, they are becoming so much bigger;

***Time for creation: man of taste and reputation in arts***

- Make a tight knit team of your scattered art critics, publishers, museum directors, curators, media people and auctioneer associates: with your financial support and their expertise, you can create the "first cosmic speed" for launching individuals and even groups into orbit in the artistic skies;

- Great amateurs of art submit to the superiority of professionalism: buy yourself the consigliere(s) with renowned scientific integrity and public authority: if you further bolster their public image, they will serve you faithfully like hunting dogs: that's inherent in the nature of modern intellectuals operating within the parameters of Great Greed;

- Form your team of artists and enmesh their destiny with yours; own their careers not their canvases only; choose them by virtue of complacency, indulgence, opportunism and compliance, avoid and disregard those who are difficult to deal with, and make them feel your displeasure;

***Time for the glory: man of modest greatness***

- Buy a lot and make yourself a collection so huge and prestigious that each and every artist and curator will fight for your attention: the big constructs have a fair chance at eternity, and they know it; they make their parties memorable and make those who are not invited green with envy. So then send them a favourable word with your compliments "hoping sincerely for your future cooperation"... (Sycophants are like dogs: you must exercise authority, provoke and impose in order to obtain subservience and ensure wagging tails).

- By now, your richness has even become symbolically legitimate, everybody is convinced that you deserve it and to bolster this rightful claim, help the needy artists that the feeble State and frustrated museum directors refused: they will venerate you like a God; being God amongst people is neither difficult nor too expensive;

***Time for the justified return: man of noble happiness***

- When profiling the brand of the collection, sell what you do not need to generate even more money in order to consolidate the brand's power by creating share holders on the side: they own "your" artists;

- Enjoy the prestige and glory of your collection and get yourself in the company of the most knowledgeable and creative circles, from politicians

to philosophers, at bargain prices: for most, a lunch and a reception will be enough; if you wish to win their awe and deep gratitude, give them a sneak preview of "hidden" and "private" delights in the company your (by now) celebrity friends and partners, or offer them one of your villas for a private vacation while you're away (100 red roses for the lady, a Rolex ...as is the usual custom with their partners... Yes, leave the butler with them. That's the decider!).

***Time for Eternity: the magician of life***

- By now, your positive personal charisma should be legitimate, as you must surely have become a friend to the public. You live in the aura of sacred success, combined with the insatiable urge to work for your community.
- Create a campaign to warn the state of the looming threat of sale or disbandment of the collection if you are not helped to house it because it has become too big for you to handle with your, feeble private resources; caring for the gigantic baby has now become expensive even for you. Hint politely at your friends and collaborators to make the public minds aware of the loss that state could potentially cause by ignoring your offer; let them plead that it is such a terrible shame for this treasure to be hidden from the eyes of the public; the odds are firmly on your side: politicians are your friends, they cannot risk some other ambitious city grabbing at the chance to get into the media...; panegyrics are easy to write and many will try to earn your "hello" at the official opening only to be surprised by the delivery of a case full of wine that your supporter simply adores....Finally, someone is attentive to his or her unique values; they shriek "Goodness, how did he know?"



- Bequest your collection to the people (a good formula!). They will gratefully spend 75 million dollars on a prestigious building to shelter your endangered baby and a few million each year thereafter to feed your growing child, keep it warm, well attended and healthy; well, didn't you do enough for it already?

- As a great public benefactor, you have the right to put your name in gold letters above the entrance: "The YOU museum of contemporary art"; the media is thrilled and public adores you; you are all they want to be;

- Watch with pride at how many people will gain paid public jobs and will devote their lives to studying the divine inspiration that guided you to compose this unique record of your time; crowds from all sides will start pouring into the city and your name will be on their lips as the great spirit behind it all!

***Time for existential dessert: happy sage***

- By now your biography is impeccable so consent modestly to become the president of the Foundation of the museum; this way you can continue collecting but now with public, private and corporate money: everybody wants to be part of your Board, your circle of patrons, your contributors, your friends; by now YOUR MUSEUM can attract the interest of sponsors and so even more money is pouring in.

- Allow those inheriting in your will to sell the rest of your collection (those pieces you retained - no one really gives everything away) so that your glory materializes even further and even your descendents continue to praise you as a cult and spread the glory of the family you have founded.

- Everyone knows that you are a national hero of international renown: they would never have spent their money as effectively as you have done for them, - and for yourself, of course. You enjoyed yourself as you made the fascinating transformation into a magic butterfly which, eventually, was able to direct even the course of art history, not only the lives of those around you. Nobody will know (except God, who you feared rarely, but now increasingly more often), that you actually remained an insignificant worm. They will always imagine you with Ms. Eternity and stare up at you in passionate submission. Without even trying, you became the picture of their unrealized, drained, exhausted and starving egos. Contrary to what we tend to believe, most people have a secret, or these days (owing to a changed value system), a far more open admiration for great rascals.

- With your fame legitimate, stable and consolidated, wait for your end with pride, as your name and deeds have been carved in stone: *Exegi monumentum!* You have seduced Eternity, a lady of strange charm and changing character. Everybody credits her with her rightful fame but, strangely, you are not convinced any more. Could there have been another one by the same name that you just never met? So, curiously and paradoxically, it will be only you, the victor, who might stay with doubts. Like it was all too easy.



Collecting is not a sin altogether. Were it not for them, we would have missed much of what we hold as a precious evidence of the human endeavour. *Fascinatio colligendi* is both a blessed state and a curse. As time goes on, collectors often get so obsessed

by the objects in their collections that it can easily turn into an addiction. Like any addiction, it becomes hard to quit because it attracts and encourages other vices.

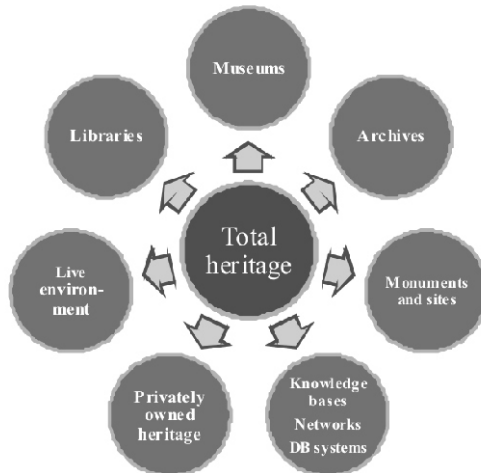
Yet it is the collecting and the collectors that made up the history of museums and much of the other heritage institutions. *Fascinatio* can also be a steady, temperate love, *amor colligendi*, - less possessive and deprived of inner compulsion and consequential aggression. Those who have suppressed compulsory collecting, and managed rather to find *bona fide* happiness in the acquisition of objects which bring them joy and widen their experience, they are the best among us, as we are all collectors, however minute, in fact, we are each curators of a sort of the total museum<sup>227</sup>. They do the collecting the successful way, the way that turns it into an art, and that is what makes the difference between the fact that we all pick up on, but only some of us attain the concept, that perseverance and coherence are the arts of collecting. Many among the real collectors made enormous efforts and were greatly devoted to building extraordinary expertise; most of them began through fascination and love, being amateurs in the basic meaning of the word. Daring and fortunate, as they often go together, they have often done the job that hundreds of dejected, bloodless and passive curators did not have the ability to do. Those most ideal examples among them leave their collections as an unconditional legacy of the public good. They do not ask that their names be immortalised with the collection out of some vain temptation to secure

<sup>227</sup>Šola, Tomislav. Towards the Total Museum, PhD theses, 1985. University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

eternity. But, even if we did insist on retaining names, it is understandable and acceptable if it is well deserved and coming from noble, considered and deliberate gratitude.

Finally, although collecting appears to be a key feature

#### The lost whole of heritage



© Tomislav Šola, 1996/99

in the fundamental characteristics that make up a museum, it is not the case. A collection of artefacts is not a *conditio sine qua non* of any museum. Besides collecting, care and communication make museums, and other such heritage institutions, what they are. They are not-for-profit, public and standardized in their basic quality expectations. Heritage institutions are public services with a mission in society and a rousing, strong profession behind it. Collections provide a precious context and function, rather like conceptual stakeholders.

## 26. Instead of conclusion

### Explaining the "joke"<sup>228</sup>

The touchstone for this book is the credibility that abides in the truth of its arguments. As Lao Tse has put it, "the words of truth always seem paradoxical; no other way ... can replace them". The list of "sins" to a true believer in heritage is itself paradoxical. It is not intended to be a negative judgement of museums, or cognate institutions, but rather a sort of reminder of former inappropriate practices, - a check list of what to avoid. There is no museum in existence that does not suffer from any of these difficulties, as perfection is impossible. The last twenty odd years of museum history show great positive changes and those have to be represented as the aspects of the new excellence<sup>229</sup>. The thirty years of European Museum of the Year (EMF), a decade of Europa Nostra and European Commission awards schemes and then the many international and national programs that followed, all

<sup>228</sup>Writing a text is like telling a joke. I know that by presenting a difficult challenge to many by advocating for a higher (ultimately, always ethical) criteria, I have sinned. As a punishment, I have told my "my joke".

<sup>229</sup>There has been the annual conference The Best in Heritage, for the last ten years, as the only international annual survey of the best practice; see: [www.TheBestInHeritage.com](http://www.TheBestInHeritage.com)

witness the need to identify and use the best examples of practice to promote excellence and bridge the gaps in a profession while still in *status nascendi*.

The book was written in response to the impression that museums were not, and many still are not, part of the solution to the issues in the contemporary world that logically fall within their reach. We should not use heritage institutions in a way that aggravates our natural flaws and risks that we develop new ones that are more harmful than those before. Will the future success of museums and heritage become their greatest temptation? It's quite likely, as we said at the beginning. On their journey, museums are doing excellent things and that's quite a reason indeed for a legitimate new museo- or mnemo-philia.

Now we enjoy thrilling acquisitions, famous directors, curators in the media spotlight, museum restaurants, cafes and shops... all in all; the glamour is growing, especially around big, blockbuster exhibition projects. There are, occasionally, ideal examples provided by certain museums that are beloved by the public; usually overcrowded, serving up the occasional blockbuster or media endorsed events that involve art superstars who bolster their image of ultimate success. We have star logic entering the heritage facet of the public space.

Successful museums may well become obligatory. They can be created around political or patriotic PR, however subtlety, or with prestigious architecture that draws in sightseers as well as entices prospective, glorified and sensationalist reviews by the media, or they can be lead by the strong public images of prominent cultural or business figures... It helps if

glamorous collectors or maecena are connected with them too, or a rich benefactor to sit on the Board, and finally, a sensational collection is most useful indeed. That may already be the case, and it is frightening enough. Being aware of the former sins may better reveal the nature of this one.

Conversely, reformists should be assisted in any way possible, even in the form of an inventory of former misconceptions. Many people, having seen deficiencies in practice, have ventured into a "complete reconstruction of the meaning of (their)...collections"<sup>230</sup>. I opted to convey this criticism not through cynicism or criticism, but as an affirmation of hope for better practice, or at least support for it. The sophisticated standards of quality, together with the mechanisms of evaluation, are the things that will make the profession. Only with criteria we may hope to arrive at that point. To date, we have only been afforded one option, to praise what was good.

I wonder, would anybody be able to reconstruct the true story (-ies) of mankind using our museums only? Quite impossibly. Well that fact deserves to be criticized. The chances rise when we think of other institutions that adjoin the domain of collective memory. But, how many experts from each of these (heritage oriented) occupations recognize the great challenges they face in the most delicate moment of human history? Not many. Certainly not enough.

<sup>230</sup>I noted this phrase and claim as proposed in 1992 by E. Hopper Greenhill in one of the public lectures.

## **A personal remark**

Smart professors might subtly refer "just by the way" to their concepts with words such as "Popper", or "certain" according to Adorno's "exclusivism", or give weight to their text with further references to "Lyotard's paradox" or "Baudrillard-esque" plays on meaning....In doing so they would be supposing that you have read all of that, or, maybe, indirectly assert that they have. That style of critique would pass according to the usual standards: a few people would read it but no one would dare to challenge it. I have read only some of the "in" theoreticians. The reason for that is mostly down to a lack of understanding (on my part), aided by the feeling that their main objective was to parade their extraordinary minds without having to stoop to the level of real people, their public institutions or their troubles. I do admit that some of what I have read I have never managed to understand. The fault is mine, and a discrediting one at that, no doubt. One must believe, however, that we, ordinary individuals amongst the laity and the professionals (aren't we always both?) should be able to profit from extraordinary thinking. Apparently, many have managed to get through and profit. Good for them, but why aren't those complaining who did not manage? Does religious apathy function to some degree here as well: I believe because I do not understand<sup>231</sup>. Do they accept, like most conventional museums, and simply renounce, withdraw and resign? This book has been written with the intention that it be readable and

<sup>231</sup>Would it appear more convincing if we assigned it to a Roman philosopher and say it in Latin: Credo quia...



discusses ideas in a manner that would befit a relaxed, professional conversation.

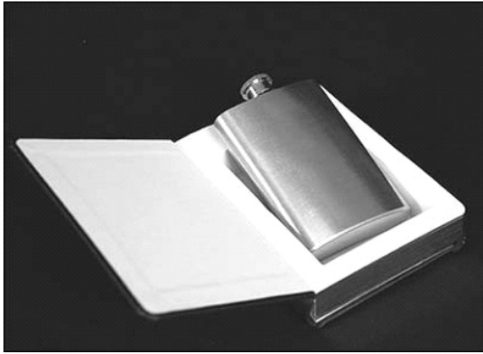
Critique is not a condemnation. If it is incorrectly undertaken or unfounded, it reveals only what a professional may have encountered as an experience, - a testimony by its own right. My former attempts at criticizing resulted in rather aggressive rejections, which is quite a natural reaction because nothing defends itself more fiercely than weakness. Only in the last decade or so, reflective of the circumstances, and, of course, thanks to the competitive pressure and rising professionalism of heritage professionals, we see that museums have acquired some affectionate reactions from the general public and that is good sign.

On the other hand, the preconceptions around museums which do us much harm need to be confronted and challenged. Some of these include: museums are only for the well educated; museums are for the rich and idle; museums are a luxury; museums represent the flippant expenditure of the rich communities; museums are money spinners; museums are too expensive for the poor to afford them; museums are incomprehensible to ordinary folks; curators and their public are unsympathetic, inflated intellectuals; museums are for the snobs and the *glitterati*. The first step of criticism is to recognise that this is not all true. There are less and less traditional museums that merely reflect tired cultural practices that are lost in formality and self-indulgence and overlook the present world agenda. Yet, they are there, often outside the city centres, at the periphery of the ruling parts of the world. But still, neither wisdom nor folly are ever found separated.

My intention was to write a book that reads well because it uses language and ideas from our daily practice. With its syntax and choice of words, in spite of the expert editing undertaken by a bright young colleague Ms. Aston Gibbs, this endeavour demonstrates that International English speakers may dare to write in this lavish language. If it is scientific in any way, then let it serve as the authentic testimony of a responsible professional, one among many, who had the opportunity to put some established professional wisdom down on paper. Having intended to offer some other reflections on the matter of the future megaprofession, I felt like doing this preparatory text. All *dont's* have their *do's*, and it is always more worthwhile to look to the bright side of developments. Besides, I love museums, and as a passionate museum goer I can criticize and praise them for hours on end. So what I did strongly supports G. Bazin's opinion that museums were always contested and opposed and it is not really fury but rather, to use his term, "mere braggadoccio", which describes slight anger at chances lost or missed. Fortunately, books have always been democratic by their very nature: those that undeservedly pass through the filter of a benevolent publisher will rightfully be stacked away by reasonable and prudent readers. No harm done to the environment, as printing runs today can be limited to just family and friends. Good.

And, yes, in finishing, if the book has proposed more questions and doubts than answers and solutions, it was meant that way: I intend to offer some answers in my subsequent writings. What I would like to suggest at the end is a general remark that, when understood, has the capacity to change the human course:

**Who says a book on Museology cannot be fun?**



...or the idea of solidarity for a tired reader.

Everything you need, everything you could need, or need to need, - is always next to you or somewhere very close. Imagine how we could change the world if only all heritage institutions could get down to business with this valuable piece of wisdom in mind...

## 27. Appendix: honouring the memory of Jonathan Swift

### **The Academy of Lagado and its eternal legitimacy<sup>232</sup>**

“We next went to the school of languages, where three professors sat in consultation upon improving that of their own country.

The first project was, to shorten discourse, by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because, in reality, all things imaginable are but norms.

The other project was, a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health, as well as brevity. For it is plain, that every word we speak is, in some degree, a diminution of our lunge by corrosion, and, consequently, contributes to the shortening of our lives. An expedient was therefore offered, “that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on.” And this invention would certainly have taken place, to the great ease as well as

<sup>232</sup>Gulliver's Travels. “CHAPTER V. The author permitted to see the grand academy of Lagado. The academy largely described. The arts wherein the professors employ themselves.”

[Http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm)

health of the subject, if the women, in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate, had not threatened to raise a rebellion unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues, after the manner of their forefathers; such constant irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people. However, many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things; which has only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged, in proportion, to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars among us, who, when they met in the street, would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other to resume their burdens, and take their leave.

But for short conversations, a man may carry implements in his pockets, and under his arms, enough to supply him; and in his house, he cannot be at a loss. Therefore the room where company meet who practise this art, is full of all things, ready at hand, requisite to furnish matter for this kind of artificial converse.

Another great advantage proposed by this invention was, that it would serve as a universal language, to be understood in all civilised nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their uses might easily be comprehended. And thus ambassadors would be qualified to treat with foreign princes, or ministers of state, to whose tongues they were utter strangers.”

### **The lesson of Swift's necromancy<sup>233</sup>**

Glubbudrib, as nearly as I can interpret the word, signifies the island of sorcerers or magician.(...) The governor and his family are served and attended by domestics of a kind somewhat unusual. By his skill in necromancy he has a power of calling whom he pleases from the dead, and commanding their service for twenty-four hours, but no longer; nor can he call the same persons up again in less than three months, except upon very extraordinary occasions.

When we arrived at the island, which was about eleven in the morning, one of the gentlemen who accompanied me went to the governor, and desired admittance for a stranger, who came on purpose to have the honour of attending on his highness. This was immediately granted, and we all three entered the gate of the palace between two rows of guards, armed and dressed after a very antic manner, and with something in their countenances that made my flesh creep with a horror I cannot express. We passed through several apartments, between servants of the same sort, ranked on each side as before, till we came to the chamber of presence; where, after three profound obeisances, and a few general questions, we were permitted to sit on three stools, near the lowest step of his highness's throne. He understood the language of Balnibarbi, although it was different from that of this island. He desired me to give him some account of my travels; and, to let me see that I should be treated without ceremony, he dismissed all his

<sup>233</sup>Gulliver's Travels. "CHAPTER VII. The author leaves Lagado: arrives at Maldonada. No ship ready. He takes a short voyage to Glubbudrib. His reception by the governor." <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm>

attendants with a turn of his finger; at which, to my great astonishment, they vanished in an instant, like visions in a dream when we awake on a sudden. I could not recover myself in some time, till the governor assured me, “that I should receive no hurt:” and observing my two companions to be under no concern, who had been often entertained in the same manner, I began to take courage, and related to his highness a short history of my several adventures; yet not without some hesitation, and frequently looking behind me to the place where I had seen those domestic spectres. I had the honour to dine with the governor, where a new set of ghosts served up the meat, and waited at table. I now observed myself to be less terrified than I had been in the morning. I stayed till sunset, but humbly desired his highness to excuse me for not accepting his invitation of lodging in the palace. My two friends and I lay at a private house in the town adjoining, which is the capital of this little island; and the next morning we returned to pay our duty to the governor, as he was pleased to command us.

After this manner we continued in the island for ten days, most part of every day with the governor, and at night in our lodging. I soon grew so familiarized to the sight of spirits, that after the third or fourth time they gave me no emotion at all: or, if I had any apprehensions left, my curiosity prevailed over them. For his highness the governor ordered me “to call up whatever persons I would choose to name, and in whatever numbers, among all the dead from the beginning of the world to the present time, and command them to answer any questions I should think fit to ask; with this condition, that my questions must

be confined within the compass of the times they lived in. And one thing I might depend upon, that they would certainly tell me the truth, for lying was a talent of no use in the lower world.”

I made my humble acknowledgments to his highness for so great a favour. We were in a chamber, from whence there was a fair prospect into the park. And because my first inclination was to be entertained with scenes of pomp and magnificence, I desired to see Alexander the Great at the head of his army, just after the battle of Arbela: which, upon a motion of the governor's finger, immediately appeared in a large field, under the window where we stood. Alexander was called up into the room: it was with great difficulty that I understood his Greek, and had but little of my own. He assured me upon his honour “that he was not poisoned, but died of a bad fever by excessive drinking.”

Next, I saw Hannibal passing the Alps, who told me “he had not a drop of vinegar in his camp.”

I saw Cæsar and Pompey at the head of their troops, just ready to engage. I saw the former, in his last great triumph. I desired that the senate of Rome might appear before me, in one large chamber, and an assembly of somewhat a later age in counterview, in another. The first seemed to be an assembly of heroes and demigods; the other, a knot of pedlars, pick-pockets, highwayman, and bullies.

The governor, at my request, gave the sign for Cæsar and Brutus to advance towards us. I was struck with a profound veneration at the sight of Brutus, and could easily discover the most consummate virtue, the greatest intrepidity and firmness of mind, the truest



love of his country, and general benevolence for mankind, in every lineament of his countenance. I observed, with much pleasure, that these two persons were in good intelligence with each other; and Cæsar freely confessed to me, “that the greatest actions of his own life were not equal, by many degrees, to the glory of taking it away.” I had the honour to have much conversation with Brutus; and was told, “that his ancestor Junius, Socrates, Epaminondas, Cato the younger, Sir Thomas More, and himself were perpetually together:” a sextumvirate, to which all the ages of the world cannot add a seventh.

It would be tedious to trouble the reader with relating what vast numbers of illustrious persons were called up to gratify that insatiable desire I had to see the world in every period of antiquity placed before me. I chiefly fed mine eyes with beholding the destroyers of tyrants and usurpers, and the restorers of liberty to oppressed and injured nations. But it is impossible to express the satisfaction I received in my own mind, after such a manner as to make it a suitable entertainment to the reader.”

### **Swift's “correction” of history<sup>234</sup>**

“Having a desire to see those ancients who were most renowned for wit and learning, I set apart one day on purpose. I proposed that Homer and Aristotle might appear at the head of all their commentators; but these were so numerous, that some hundreds were forced to attend in the court, and outward rooms of the palace. I knew, and could distinguish those two heroes, at first

<sup>234</sup>Gulliver's Travels. “CHAPTER VIII. A further account of Glubbudubdrib. Ancient and modern history corrected.”

“[Http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm)

sight, not only from the crowd, but from each other. Homer was the taller and comelier person of the two, walked very erect for one of his age, and his eyes were the most quick and piercing I ever beheld. Aristotle stooped much, and made use of a staff. His visage was meagre, his hair lank and thin, and his voice hollow. I soon discovered that both of them were perfect strangers to the rest of the company, and had never seen or heard of them before; and I had a whisper from a ghost who shall be nameless, “that these commentators always kept in the most distant quarters from their principals, in the lower world, through a consciousness of shame and guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the meaning of those authors to posterity.” I introduced Didymus and Eustathius to Homer, and prevailed on him to treat them better than perhaps they deserved, for he soon found they wanted a genius to enter into the spirit of a poet. But Aristotle was out of all patience with the account I gave him of Scotus and Ramus, as I presented them to him; and he asked them, “whether the rest of the tribe were as great dunces as themselves?”

I then desired the governor to call up Descartes and Gassendi, with whom I prevailed to explain their systems to Aristotle. This great philosopher freely acknowledged his own mistakes in natural philosophy, because he proceeded in many things upon conjecture, as all men must do; and he found that Gassendi, who had made the doctrine of Epicurus as palatable as he could, and the vortices of Descartes, were equally to be exploded. He predicted the same fate to attraction, whereof the present learned are such zealous asserters. He said, “that new systems of nature were but new

fashions, which would vary in every age; and even those, who pretend to demonstrate them from mathematical principles, would flourish but a short period of time, and be out of vogue when that was determined.”

I spent five days in conversing with many others of the ancient learned. I saw most of the first Roman emperors. I prevailed on the governor to call up Heliogabalus's cooks to dress us a dinner, but they could not show us much of their skill, for want of materials. A helot of Agesilaus made us a dish of Spartan broth, but I was not able to get down a second spoonful.

The two gentlemen, who conducted me to the island, were pressed by their private affairs to return in three days, which I employed in seeing some of the modern dead, who had made the greatest figure, for two or three hundred years past, in our own and other countries of Europe; and having been always a great admirer of old illustrious families, I desired the governor would call up a dozen or two of kings, with their ancestors in order for eight or nine generations. But my disappointment was grievous and unexpected. For, instead of a long train with royal diadems, I saw in one family two fiddlers, three spruce courtiers, and an Italian prelate. In another, a barber, an abbot, and two cardinals. I have too great a veneration for crowned heads, to dwell any longer on so nice a subject. But as to counts, marquises, dukes, earls, and the like, I was not so scrupulous. And I confess, it was not without some pleasure, that I found myself able to trace the particular features, by which certain families are distinguished, up to their originals. I could plainly

discover whence one family derives a long chin; why a second has abounded with knaves for two generations, and fools for two more; why a third happened to be crack-brained, and a fourth to be sharpeners; whence it came, what Polydore Virgil says of a certain great house, *Nec vir fortis, nec foemina casta*; how cruelty, falsehood, and cowardice, grew to be characteristics by which certain families are distinguished as much as by their coats of arms; who first brought the pox into a noble house, which has lineally descended scrofulous tumours to their posterity. Neither could I wonder at all this, when I saw such an interruption of lineages, by pages, lackeys, valets, coachmen, gamblers, fiddlers, players, captains, and pickpockets.

I was chiefly disgusted with modern history. For having strictly examined all the persons of greatest name in the courts of princes, for a hundred years past, I found how the world had been misled by prostitute writers, to ascribe the greatest exploits in war, to cowards; the wisest counsel, to fools; sincerity, to flatterers; Roman virtue, to betrayers of their country; piety, to atheists; chastity, to sodomites; truth, to informers: how many innocent and excellent persons had been condemned to death or banishment by the practising of great ministers upon the corruption of judges, and the malice of factions: how many villains had been exalted to the highest places of trust, power, dignity, and profit: how great a share in the motions and events of courts, councils, and senates might be challenged by bawds, whores, pimps, parasites, and buffoons. How low an opinion I had of human wisdom and integrity, when I was truly informed of the springs and motives of great enterprises and

revolutions in the world, and of the contemptible accidents to which they owed their success.

Here I discovered the roguery and ignorance of those who pretend to write anecdotes, or secret history; who send so many kings to their graves with a cup of poison; will repeat the discourse between a prince and chief minister, where no witness was by; unlock the thoughts and cabinets of ambassadors and secretaries of state; and have the perpetual misfortune to be mistaken. Here I discovered the true causes of many great events that have surprised the world; how a whore can govern the back-stairs, the back-stairs a council, and the council a senate. A general confessed, in my presence, “that he got a victory purely by the force of cowardice and ill conduct;” and an admiral, “that, for want of proper intelligence, he beat the enemy, to whom he intended to betray the fleet.” Three kings protested to me, “that in their whole reigns they never did once prefer any person of merit, unless by mistake, or treachery of some minister in whom they confided; neither would they do it if they were to live again:” and they showed, with great strength of reason, “that the royal throne could not be supported without corruption, because that positive, confident, restiff temper, which virtue infused into a man, was a perpetual clog to public business.”

I had the curiosity to inquire in a particular manner, by what methods great numbers had procured to themselves high titles of honour, and prodigious estates; and I confined my inquiry to a very modern period: however, without grating upon present times, because I would be sure to give no offence even to foreigners (for I hope the reader need not be told, that I

do not in the least intend my own country, in what I say upon this occasion,) a great number of persons concerned were called up; and, upon a very slight examination, discovered such a scene of infamy, that I cannot reflect upon it without some seriousness. Perjury, oppression, subornation, fraud, pandarism, and the like infirmities, were among the most excusable arts they had to mention; and for these I gave, as it was reasonable, great allowance. But when some confessed they owed their greatness and wealth to sodomy, or incest; others, to the prostituting of their own wives and daughters; others, to the betraying of their country or their prince; some, to poisoning; more to the perverting of justice, in order to destroy the innocent, I hope I may be pardoned, if these discoveries inclined me a little to abate of that profound veneration, which I am naturally apt to pay to persons of high rank, who ought to be treated with the utmost respect due to their sublime dignity, by us their inferiors.

I had often read of some great services done to princes and states, and desired to see the persons by whom those services were performed. Upon inquiry I was told, "that their names were to be found on no record, except a few of them, whom history has represented as the vilest of rogues and traitors." As to the rest, I had never once heard of them. They all appeared with dejected looks, and in the meanest habit; most of them telling me, "they died in poverty and disgrace, and the rest on a scaffold or a gibbet."

Among others, there was one person, whose case appeared a little singular. He had a youth about eighteen years old standing by his side. He told me,

“he had for many years been commander of a ship; and in the sea fight at Actium had the good fortune to break through the enemy's great line of battle, sink three of their capital ships, and take a fourth, which was the sole cause of Antony's flight, and of the victory that ensued; that the youth standing by him, his only son, was killed in the action.” He added, “that upon the confidence of some merit, the war being at an end, he went to Rome, and solicited at the court of Augustus to be preferred to a greater ship, whose commander had been killed; but, without any regard to his pretensions, it was given to a boy who had never seen the sea, the son of Libertina, who waited on one of the emperor's mistresses. Returning back to his own vessel, he was charged with neglect of duty, and the ship given to a favourite page of Publicola, the vice-admiral; whereupon he retired to a poor farm at a great distance from Rome, and there ended his life.” I was so curious to know the truth of this story, that I desired Agrippa might be called, who was admiral in that fight. He appeared, and confirmed the whole account: but with much more advantage to the captain, whose modesty had extenuated or concealed a great part of his merit.

I was surprised to find corruption grown so high and so quick in that empire, by the force of luxury so lately introduced; which made me less wonder at many parallel cases in other countries, where vices of all kinds have reigned so much longer, and where the whole praise, as well as pillage, has been engrossed by the chief commander, who perhaps had the least title to either.

As every person called up made exactly the same appearance he had done in the world, it gave me melancholy reflections to observe how much the race of human kind was degenerated among us within these hundred years past; how the pox, under all its consequences and denominations had altered every lineament of an English countenance; shortened the size of bodies, unbraced the nerves, relaxed the sinews and muscles, introduced a sallow complexion, and rendered the flesh loose and rancid.

I descended so low, as to desire some English yeoman of the old stamp might be summoned to appear; once so famous for the simplicity of their manners, diet, and dress; for justice in their dealings; for their true spirit of liberty; for their valour, and love of their country. Neither could I be wholly unmoved, after comparing the living with the dead, when I considered how all these pure native virtues were prostituted for a piece of money by their grand-children; who, in selling their votes and managing at elections, have acquired every vice and corruption that can possibly be learned in a court.”

### **Closing remark**

Of course it's easy to blame Swift for exaggerating in his critique, and so he did, in a way. But the critique is not there necessarily to be truthful by the measures of normative logic. Its metaphors and pictures are mind movers and dramatized reminders. In this way, critique is unimportant by itself; its very influence is embedded in its character, like an enzyme or catalyser, and this is what counts. It materialises in the desired objectives of improving a designated process, product or state by taking on the odium. This could be the



beginning of a chapter on the true role of intellectuals, artists and, indeed, curators, but that should go towards a book on the job well done. Once the improvements occur and a higher quality is defined, critique has done its part. Like these process-enhancing substances, those that enable the process, do not participate in the final state. Criticism is like an old, self-denying and self-sacrificing friend, willing to be the bearer of bad news and play the *advocatus diaboli*, in an effort to prevent self-indulgence and superficial self-satisfaction, - a person one returns to with gratitude, but after hating him or her for while. The nature of any heritage institution is very similar to the notions of self-analysis and self-healing of the community it serves and the identity it cares for. The future of museums will be difficult and yet precious. Museums must act, simultaneously, as firm friends and as active supporters in times of trouble.

Many public institutions have surely betrayed their founders, their public supporters and money providers. I hope some readers will agree at least with some of the arguments here. Even if only a few remain, then that's still a problem.

Most likely in the same way, many have become so corrupted by their nature that they have lost social and strategic intelligence, and to put it plainly, have become unintelligent, having immersed themselves in their own logic, they have lost feeling for their environment. I believe that there are stupid organisations of all kinds. If governments can be stupid and if numerous corporations are evidently stupid, why wouldn't there be stupid museums? Stupid people, and there are many of them, can be recognized

in spite of their expert camouflage (by the way, the more important the position the better the disguise). It would probably come down to a matter of training for democracy and quality in order to properly learn how to recognize them. All forms of stupidity are, as a rule, grave, stern and grimly circumspect. At any time in any given situation, those displaying it have an excessively good opinion of themselves and their own importance, and, finally, they take the manmade world and its structures of interpretation too seriously and with solemn sobriety.

And, finally, just as Swift said one point: "that all my criticism is justified, I shall not obtrude, but submit to the judicious reader"<sup>235</sup>.

<sup>235</sup>Swift, Johnatan. Gulliver's travels, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm>

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<sup>1</sup>the same text has been published in the congress publication in Barcelona where the seminar has been repeated / isti tekst objavljen je u kongresnoj publikaciji u Barceloni gdje je seminar ponovljen.

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## Biography

**Tomislav Sladojević Šola** was born on the 11th of June 1948 in Zagreb, Croatia, where he attended elementary and high school commenced an undergraduate degree in Architecture, transferring after one year to study Art history and English language and literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. After the completion of his undergraduate degree he commenced post-graduate studies in Journalism at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb. He began his professional career soon after as a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (now the Museum of Naive Art), in Zagreb. As a young curator he undertook additional post-graduate study in Zagreb, in the field of Museology (CSBDIZ), after the completion of his first year of study, he continued the degree at the Sorbonne as a bursar of the French Government. There he attended two semesters of post-graduate study in Contemporary Museology which were conducted by Georges Henri Rivière, and carried out research in ICOM's Documentation centre. Soon after his return from France he became the director of the Museum Documentation Centre (1981) and the editor-in-chief of the Museological Magazine, both the only initiatives of their kind in Yugoslavia at the time. On a number of occasions he was a participant in various seminars, including the Commonwealth Institute and Salzburg Seminar. During



his directorship he actively engaged the profession at the international level. In addition to his conference involvement, Professor Šola has organised annual conferences for ICOM's (International Council of Museums) three international committees, ICOFOM, ICTOP, CIMAM of ICOM. Furthermore, he was the founder and Programme Director of the International Summer School for Heritage Studies (ISSHS) in Jyvaskyla, Finland (1990). He has occupied important positions within the museum profession, both at the national and international level, including the chairmanship of the National Committee of ICOM/UNESCO Yugoslavia (1981-1987), a seat on the Executive Council of ICOM (1983-1986), Board Membership on ICOFOM (International Committee of Museology/ICOM), and Board Membership on a range of professional publications, including the magazines *Museum International*, *Museum Practice* and *IJHS*.

Professor Šola earned a Ph.D. in Museology at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, for this dissertation "Towards the Total Museum" (1985). This drew him towards a career in academia. In 1989 he was elected a docent at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb and the Chair of Museology, which was established within the department of Information Sciences. He was appointed to the role of Department Head and is an active member of the Faculty Council, taking part in two scientific projects and currently leading one. Over the course of these professional undertakings, Professor Šola has established three of the six subjects he continues to teach at the university.

As a committed participant in the field of Museology, Professor Šola has presented papers at 52 international

professional events in 27 countries. As a guest lecturer and keynote speaker he has lectured widely (approximately 300 hours in total across India, Finland, Sweden, Canada, Spain/Catalonia, Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovenia, France, Turkey, Great Britain, Estonia, Serbia, Macedonia, Denmark), attending regular sessions at ISSOM, Masaryk University in Brno, the University of Ljubljana (postgraduate study), the European University, Budapest, and at the European Heritage School in Barcelona, where he served on the Academic Board. Currently, he lectures part-time in the Faculty of Letters and the University of Arts in Belgrade (International Postgraduate Study).

Professor Šola has authored two art monographs and numerous forewords and introductions to exhibition catalogues, as well as fifty two articles on artists and exhibitions. Beginning in 1980, he has continued to write extensively on Museology and museum practice. Professor Šola is the author of the awarded publication "Essays on Museums and their theory - towards the cybernetic museum" (Finnish Museums Association, Helsinki, 1997), which was granted the J. J. Strossmayer award for book of the year (information sciences) in 1998 by the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2004 the extended version was translated into Croatian and published in Zagreb. The integral version of his PhD has been translated into Serbian and published by the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade (2011). In total, Professor Šola has published about 275 articles in professional magazines and newspapers and contributed chapters to seven books which have been published in Great Britain, Finland and Poland.

In 2001 the Croatian Museum Society (HMD) published his book "Marketing in Museums or the virtue and how to make it known", which received an annual professional

award the following year. The book was also published in Belgrade in 2002. A number of Professor Šola's publications and writings have been translated into as many as twelve languages.

Professor Šola has conceived of and led numerous museum projects, including new and redevelopment initiatives, such as: the Museum of National Park Triglav (Trenta, Slovenia), the Museum of Recent History (Ljubljana, Slovenia), Regional Museum (Maribor, Slovenia); "Energion" (Zagreb, Croatia). He is the creator of the "Slovenianum" project (Ljubljana, Slovenia), author of the concept of "Bridges - the Virtual Museum of Europe" (further developed by "Haus der Geschichte", Bonn, Germany) and developed the ideal plan for the Jewish Cultural Centre and Synagogue (Zagreb, Croatia, 2003-2004) etc. He has undertaken appointments as an advisor to the government of Republic of Montenegro regarding reorganization and heritage care management in strategic planning for the Heritage Policy (2004-2005). Most recent projects include: the "Heritage Centre" (Zadar, Croatia), the "Wind Museum" (Istria) and the "Museum of Croatian Diaspora (Zagreb, Croatia), the "Heritage Centre Novi Dvori" (Zaprešić, Croatia), "Benedictine Nuns Museum" (Pag, Croatia); strategic destination brand planning for the city of Bakar (Croatia) and concept development for "The Best in Tourism" and "Cultural Tourism Business Club", as well as schemes for the Chamber of Economy of Croatia.

In Jyväskylä, Finland, Professor Šola founded the International Summer School for Heritage Studies (ISSHS, 1990) and started the heritage centre project "This is Finland". He has been a member of the Panel for the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA - EMF 1993-2001) and is now a member of the Council of Europa

Nostra and a jury member of its awards scheme. In 2004 he was appointed as Chairman of the Association of Cultural Tourism at the Croatian Chamber of Commerce. He has also been a member of the Register Board for Information Science (National Council of Science, 2005-2007).

Since 2002 Professor Šola has continued to organize and develop the international annual event "The Best in Heritage" in Dubrovnik, Croatia, ([www.TheBestInHeritage.com](http://www.TheBestInHeritage.com)), an organization that he conceived a number of ago. Professor Šola is committed to promoting and pursuing innovation for the future, owing to this vision he is also the author of dozens of unrealized museum projects, attractions, experience industry projects, experimental initiatives concerning the future of heritage communication and the developmental use of cultural heritage; one of these has already been revealed in its experimental phase (Global Love Museum). He has devised the concepts of Heritology (1981) and Mnemosophy (1995) and the syntagm of the cybernetic museum (1985), all in active use within the developing profession. Professor Šola attained his full professorship in 2009. Presently he occupies the position of Head Chair of Museology and Heritage Management at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, at the University of Zagreb.

