

- 122 Luca Basso Peressut, Francesca Lanz & Gennaro Postiglione (eds). *European Museums in the 21st Century: Setting the Framework*. Vol. 1, 2, 3. Milan: Politecnico di Mi-lano. 2013. (MeLa Books 07:1–3: mela-project.eu/ publications/1091, <http://www.mela-project.eu/publications/1090>, <http://www.mela-project.eu/publications/1092>)

This publication is one of the outcomes of the research project *MeLa – European Museums in an Age of Migrations*, a four-year interdisciplinary project initiated in 2011 and funded by the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme. The project uses the concept of “migration” (of people, objects, ideas) as a prism through which to examine the role and relevance of museums in the 21st century.

The publication is an analytical tour de force, it brilliantly succeeds in providing an overview of the most recent and exciting European museum projects. The most immediate message conveyed by the multifarious contributions to the volumes is basic yet powerful: European museums are in a state of ferment, they are undergoing major institutional, architectural, philosophical and museological transformations. They are part and parcel of urban landscapes changing rapidly in their ethnic, social and architectural configurations.

The analysis developed in the contributions to the volumes creates a rich and complex picture. Whilst it is impossible to do justice here to its nuances, some elements emerge as revelatory of the ongoing changes. Firstly, the timeliness and contemporary relevance of the analysis: the museum initiatives examined almost without exception date back to the last

decade or so. Secondly, most of the museums discussed have recently undergone (or plan to undergo) major institutional re-organizations – institutional merges, architectural renovation, relocations, and rethinking of the criteria used in the classification of collections, among other. These formal transformations express deeper changes in the way European societies perceive museums, themselves, and other societies. Thirdly, temporary exhibitions emerge as an ideal medium for museum communication: the flexibility and modularity they afford makes them suitable to tackle multifaceted, ever changing features of our societies such as human mobility (one of the hottest exhibition topic and a key factor in the transformation of museum audiences). Lastly, the chapters in the volumes point at an increasing degree of collaboration among European museums (especially among small and medium scale institutions), and the definite obsolescence of the image of the self-contained museum. The format of the volumes is noteworthy. In addition to several feature articles, each section includes “Case Studies”. These are in depth profiles of the museum institutions mentioned in the articles. Each profile is correlated with colour photos, floor plans, as well as bibliographic references. These “Case Studies” are a much welcome addition to the usual argumentative papers, as they provide the kind of background institutional histories, collection highlights, and exhibition critique that authors are often forced to cut or reduce in their papers. These sections also contribute to set the volumes as valuable reference material one can turn to for consultation over time. Also worthy of note is the extraordinary richness of the bibliographic resources provided at the end of each chapter. Taken together, these bibliographic references

offer a unique tool for students and scholars of European museums, whilst at the same time providing a picture of the extensive recent scholarship on and in European Museums. Whilst the texts would have benefited from a more accurate proof-reading, this does not detract from the unquestionable academic quality and weighty disciplinary contribution of this publication.

The first volume is organized in three sections: “National History Museums”, “Natural History Museums” and “Museums of Ethnography and Museums of Culture(s).”

In the opening chapter, “Museums as agonistic spaces”, Clelia Pozzi raises the question of how the forces of globalisation and the connected phenomena of migration and mobility recast the adjective “national” that qualifies the most prominent museums in Europe. Drawing on a concept elaborated by political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Clelia suggests to reframe national museums as arenas for agonistic pluralism, that is, sites where different perspectives can be accommodated and come into dialogue. She suggests prioritizing temporary and thematic exhibitions over permanent and chronological ones, as well as emphasizing the use of Information and Communication Technologies in interactive exhibitions.

The role of museums in radical democracies is the topic of Chantal Mouffe’s chapter. Mouffe argues that art museums in particular, can become venues for the critical political intervention that lies at the basis of democratic systems. Art museums can turn into “sites of opposition to the neoliberal market hegemony” through critical pedagogy and engagement with public debate, as illustrated by the progressive initiatives of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona in the 2000s.

A series of “Case Studies” completes this first section devoted to national history museums.

The second section of volume 1, devoted to natural history museums, opens with an overview article on the development of natural history museums in Europe, written by Fabienne Galangau-Querat, Sarah Gamaire and Lurence Isnard. The authors stress that the recent engagement of natural history museums with environmental issues upholds the historical remit of this institution: to develop a critical reflection on the relationship between human beings and their environment. Natural history museums have been notably crucial in the crystallization of the concept and materiality of “nature as heritage”, and in the understanding of scientific knowledge as socially embedded. The following article, by Florence Balaën, takes a closer look at the surprisingly extended network of regional museums of natural history in France (including around 60 institutions). Despite difficulties in finding visibility, regional museums have found renewed impetus through collaborative projects such as the *Observatory of Heritage and Scientific and Technical Cultural Affairs (OCIM) Museum Platform*, including a shared database of information on collections, activities, statistics, and visitors.

In his contribution – “Escape from bureaucracy” – Giovanni Pinna draws a link between museums and the broader context of the administrative, legal and political systems in which they operate. High levels of centralization and bureaucracy, as in the case of Italy, are considered harmful to museums, as they curtail the potential for productivity of this institution, and discourage and prevent efforts to set up a healthy managerial direction and competent, dedicated staff.

124 The following chapter is a discussion, in the form of interview with its museum director, of the renovation plans of the Natural History Museum of Lille. The Museum aims to create immersive, interactive and transdisciplinary displays that include citizens' points of view. The renovation plan is the focus point around which a museum team (including senior and younger staff), an outside consultant, and a committee of experts (composed of curators from other museums) are currently working. The renovation also involves a change of location; interestingly, rather than opting for a new, flashy building the Museum has privileged a 19th century former girls' school not to disrupt the Museum's image and its perception among local audiences. The section devoted to natural history museums is completed by a set of case studies.

Camilla Pagani's chapter "Ethnographic museums: Towards a new paradigm?" opens the last section of volume 1, devoted to museums of ethnography and museums of culture(s). The chapter examines the recent transformation of museums of ethnography as a result of the post-colonial critique and the ensuing crisis of representation. Pagani's analysis of the new wave of ethnographic museums in Europe (both newly built, such as the Quai Branly in Paris, and renovated such as the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam) points at a "paradigm shift" in ethnographic museums. She discusses a range of institutional strategies to exit the post-colonial crisis, including blockbuster exhibitions, emphasis on objects' aesthetics and "World Art", self-reflexive representation of museums' colonial role, engagement with contemporary issues such as migration and globalisation, and collaborative work with communities.

"Exhibition-ism" is the evocative title of the

contribution of Maria Camilla de Palma, director of the Castello D'Albertis Museo delle Culture del Mondo, in Genoa, Italy. According to de Palma, museums of anthropology are faced by two major challenges: to create meaning through decontextualized ethnographic collections, and to acknowledge objects' rich social lives. The author suggests to think of the work of museums as developing around "a story, and an encounter over the course of a long common journey". This thinking has led to the collaboration of the Museo with source communities, contemporary artists, and local immigrant communities in the organization of exhibitions, scientific and artistic workshops and events.

In the next chapter Nelia Dias examines "Cultural difference and cultural diversity" in three French museums – the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero (MET), its successor the Musée de l'Homme, and the Musée du Quai Branly. Over more than one century, diverging understandings of cultural difference and cultural diversity have generated diverging museum philosophies and practices. Whilst the MET embraced evolutionist notions of cultural and physical difference, the Musée de l'Homme, in line with cultural relativism in anthropology, asserted the principle of equality among human races and recast racial inferiority as cultural difference, that is as a facet of cultural pluralism. The Museum of the Quai Branly reframed the notion of cultural diversity (expressed through art and aesthetics) and couched it within the republican values of citizenship, secularism, and equivalence of cultures, with the effect of obfuscating the rights of communities to be recognized by virtue of their cultural or religious difference.

In the following chapter, Klas Grinell discusses in an interview his role as “curator of contemporary global issues” at the National Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg. A historian of ideas by formation, Klas points out the need in museums not only of experts in material culture, but also of curators focusing on the history of mentalities, as a tool to constantly reinterpret and recontextualize collections to make them relevant to current audiences. Klas explains how the exhibition topics at the Museum mostly develop around the concept of globalisation, that is an exploration of a cultural or historical phenomenon both in its local roots and its global ramifications.

“[S]oggetti Migranti” is the title of the following chapter, and the name of an exhibition held in 2012 and 2013 at the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini” curated by Vito Lattanzi. In this chapter-interview, Lattanzi discusses this exhibition project, its origins and challenges. The title (“Migrant subjects/objects”) suggests the goal of the project: to explore the ambiguities of the relationship between persons and things, a relationship that becomes all the more complex in contexts of migration and displacement. The museological standpoint is the idea that ethnographic objects can have a new life – new meanings, values and interpretations – when seen through the eyes of diaspora communities. The Museum participated in two major European programmes, READ-ME (European Network of Diaspora Associations and Museums of Ethnography) 1 and 2, involving a partnership among several ethnographic museums in Europe. In refreshing contrast to the celebratory tone of much museum studies literature on collaborative work, Lattanzi is

open about the issues encountered by the Museum during collaborative projects, such as the identification and (self-)legitimation of the diaspora associations, establishing mutual recognition and trust, sharing authority, mediating among different kinds of “expertise”. Lattanzi’s words frame collaborative work as an ongoing learning process, where interpersonal skills are crucial, and “mistakes” and partial “failures” are likely to be the only and most effective way to grow professionally and institutionally. Volume 1 concludes with a “Case Studies” section.

The second volume of the book is devoted to two main museum categories: migration museums and city museums. The volume opens with a chapter on migration museums by Anna Chira Cimoli. The spread of museums devoted to migration in Europe is a recent phenomenon, dating of only a decade or so ago. Migration is a political subject; hence the fate of migration museums has been linked to the political settings in which these projects arose. Cimoli notes the difficulty to draw a link between European migrants of the past and today’s Extra-European immigrants in Europe.

In the chapter “Museum and the nation”, Joachim Baur examines the ties between these two entities. In addition to a critical review of the literature on the topic, Baur notes how migration in an increasingly globalised world is problematizing the association between museums and the nation, since the ethnic contours of the latter are becoming more and more blurred and volatile and the forces of de-territorialization, and mobility are leading towards increasingly plural, fragmented and contested notions of cultural heritage.

The German Emigration Center is the focus of the chapter written by Simone Eick, director

126 of the Center. The institution, inaugurated in 2005, deals with both emigration from, and immigration to Germany. Its exhibitions use object biographies and historical reconstruction to narrate migration, as well as oral history and personal accounts of migrants.

The “Case Studies” section provides further information about the German Emigration Center (European Museum of the Year in 2007, the Center has become a role model for museums of migration in Europe). The second part of volume 2, devoted to city museums, opens with a chapter by Francesca Lanz entitled “City museums in transition: A European overview”. Lanz develops an insightful reflection on the multifaceted character of city museums, based on a survey conducted in 50 institutions. The number of city museums has significantly increased throughout Europe over the last decade. Today their remit lies at the intersection of city-branding, urban regeneration, and socio-cultural inclusion. In Lanz’s view, main challenges for city museums include managing the heterogeneity of their historical collections, and finding a clear institutional voice in debates about the city’s social, cultural, economic and architectural transformations.

Jack Lohman, museum academic and Chairman of the National Museum in Warsaw, former director of the Museum of London, authors the chapter “City museums: Do we have a role in shaping the global community?” Lohman reminds us that the combined effects of ignorance and fears of cultural diversity, persisting conflicts and exclusionary practices, as well as increasing territorialism, make up for a unique global context and a most challenging time both for museums and for societies at large. Lohman points at three options to move out of this

impasse: assimilation to a dominant culture, exclusion, or acknowledgement of difference on an equal basis. According to Lohman, it is in this third direction that museums have a crucial role to play.

The last chapter of the second volume is an interview with Marie-Paule Jungblut, former Chief of the International Committee for Museums and Collections for Archaeology and History (ICMAH) and of the International Association of Museums of History (AIMH), currently director of the Historisches Museum in Basel. The interview uses the Museum of History of the city of Luxembourg to tackle the topic “International networking projects and the web”. Since its opening in 1996, this Museum has collaborated with other European museums around the development of exhibitions and digital products as a way to add value to exhibitions, reduce production costs, and increase institutional visibility. Trust, motivation and effective communication among staff in different museums, notes Jungblut, are the key elements of a successful collaborative venture.

The third volume of the series is devoted to local museums, war museums and temporary exhibitions.

Elena Montanari writes about “Local museums as strategic cultural forces for 21st century society”. The label “local museums” includes heterogeneous museums typologies, yet characterized by strong links with the distinctive features of a place. Local museums act as “guardians of history” and as sites where memory becomes materialized thus “awakening the consciousness of temporality and territoriality” considered foundational for the definition of individual and collective belonging. In this sense, local museums are seen as a force resisting cultural homogenization

and able to redress the gap between local and global pulls.

Hugues de Varine authors the second chapter in the volume, devoted to “Local museums of the future”. De Varine discusses the current crisis of local museums (due to lack of voluntary work, increasing costs and disengagement of public authorities) and suggests a way out through a generalized reconfiguration of local museums (including institutional networking and merges).

The second section of the third volume focuses on war museums. In “Narratives of conflicts” Luca Basso Peressut provides an overview of European war museums. He discusses war museums as sites for the celebration of heroism, patriotism, nationalism, and cognate ideologies. Current European war museums, notes the author, can be divided into two categories: those which place weapons in an historical-aesthetic perspective (such as the Musée de l’Armée in Paris), and those that take a critical stance on past European conflicts and their social consequences. Increasingly, military history is merging with cultural and social history to produce more comprehensive accounts of war experiences, but also new phenomena such as “war tourism”. Basso Peressut’s chapter is interspersed with case studies of European war museums. The last section of the third volume is devoted to temporary exhibitions. In “Forms of collecting/ forms of hearing”, Marco Borsotti discusses exhibitions as meeting ground not only for different kinds of knowledge and disciplines (notably design and humanistic approaches), but also for different cultures. Borsotti argues that temporary exhibitions are ideal tools for experimentation and immersion in “the contemporary”. The chapter “Exhibiting

history”, authored by Paolo Rosa for the Studio Azzurro, discusses narrative and design in the 2011 project *Fare gli Italiani* at the Officine Grandi Riparazioni, and industrial archaeological site of the early 20th century, in Turin, Italy.

“7bO – The 7 Billion Others project” is the title of an interview with Galitt Kenan, project manager in several initiatives aimed to foster intercultural dialogue, such as the traveling exhibition mentioned in the title, at the GoodPlanet Foundation. *The 7 Billion Others* is a cinematic project based on the concept of “solidarity” or “participative innovation” (whereby the global digital community contributes ideas and content).

In the interview “Fetish Modernity, Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium”, Anna Seiderer talks of her experience as curator of the exhibition *Fetish Modernity*. The exhibition draws on Bruno Latour writings to explore the limitations of the discourse on modernity in the West, and uses collections to explore the hybrid character of culture and modernity.

The activities of the Museum of Ethnography of Neuchâtel (MEN), Switzerland, are discussed in an interview with Marc-Olivier Gonseth, director since 2006. The Museum has distinguished itself for expanding the notion of ethnographic objects to mass-produced, everyday contemporary objects, and using collections to explore in a self-critical mode assumptions and beliefs about Western societies.

The “Case Studies” section provides details of the exhibitions. Given the broad range of topics, case studies, and institutional typologies examined in the volumes, there is little doubt that this publication is a valuable reading for students and scholars of museums

128 willing to keep up with the fast-pace changes that are transforming the European museum landscape.

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