MUSEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Museological Review
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Contents

Note from the Editors

In 1994, a group of PhD students from the Museum Studies course at the University of Leicester started an academic Journal. For the occasion of the publication of the first issue, Susan Pearce wrote an encouraging welcome to *Museological Review*. Since then several generations of committed students have continued the life of the journal. Last year, the elected editorial board agreed on not only following our successors' path but also fostering and encouraging new creative opportunities.

As part of the re-development plan of the journal, the team considered a re-design of *Museological Review*. This year, we intend to publish two issues: one issue which has seven peer-reviewed and edited articles taken from the highly successful 2012 PhD student-led conference '*Museum Utopias*' and the second issue which will be published towards the end of the year on museologically relevant papers more generally. The conference '*Museum Utopias*', held over 2 days at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, included sessions on *Lost Utopias*, *Personal Utopias*, *Designing Utopia*, *Problematic Utopias* and *Questioning the Profession: Unrealised Utopias*. The papers in this Journal were presented as part of those sessions, and have subsequently undergone a rigorous peer-review and editing process. They are reflective of the diversity and the wide-ranging subjects which PhD students from both the School at the University of Leicester and those from other academic fields and institutions research. The articles presented here range from freedom of small museums in Estonia to a lost museum ideal of the Rhineland Museum of 1925 and from artists as curators to professional practice in UK museums.

We are delighted to present the first issue of 2013 and look forward to hearing from our readers about their ideas for the re-development and re-design of the Journal. In particular, what features do you think work well and what could be improved? For the second issue of 2013, which will hopefully be published at the end of the year, we are encouraging all PhD students, both in Leicester and beyond, to submit articles on a museologically relevant subject.

We do hope you enjoy this edition of the Journal. We would like to wish all our readers a peaceful and prosperous year ahead!

Editorial Board: Cintia Velázquez (Editor-in-chief), Petrina Foti
Catharina Hendrick, Karin Renold

Seeking Utopia: An Odyssey into Museum Worlds Past, Present and Future

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched C-beams glitter in the darkness at the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.
Roy Batty, *Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott, 1982

Like Thomas More's imaginary island of 1516, the word 'Utopia' may conjure for us a radiant vision of future society, of peace and harmony, technological progress, and economic prosperity. From the Greek *eu*, 'good', and *topos*, 'place', Utopia also conveys a sense of optimism, dreaming and imagination without limits; in short, a brave new world in which anything is possible. However, Utopia has another, darker side, and is more commonly translated as 'no-place'. From here emerges not only the impossibility, but the failure of Utopia: the *dystopia*, or the Utopia of the few at the expense of the many, and the abandoned, ruined or forgotten Utopia. All this must lead us to ask: what is Utopia, and to whom does it belong? And what is to become of the ruins of Utopia?

Museum Utopias: Navigating the Imaginary, Ideal and Possible Museum was an attempt to harness the concept of Utopia as a central theme and lens with which to navigate some of the most pressing questions and issues in museums today. Organised by the PhD community at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, this postgraduate conference was hosted by the School on 27 - 28 March 2012, and was funded by a generous sponsorship package from Hanwell Instruments Ltd (part of the IMC Group Ltd), and by the Researcher Development Fund at the Graduate School, University of Leicester. We are extremely grateful to both for making our idea a reality.

The contemporary museum is a construct whose ideals have changed greatly over its long history, and which has often attempted to embrace Utopian ambitions in its conception, planning and purpose. However, the conceptual landscape of the museum is ever-changing, and in this age of austerity we face the challenge of how to deliver more with less, and the tensions this creates between ideal and reality. Utopia compels us to reimagine, and at times remodel, the nature and purpose of the museum, and it therefore provides an appropriate critical lens with which to explore the latest developments within the sector, in theory as well as in practice. Through the forum of this interdisciplinary and international conference, we sought to chart the key topographical features of this strange new terrain; a landscape which makes it possible to engage

deeply with the idea of the museum – with what museums are, what they have been, and what they have the potential to become.

Building on the success of previous symposia, including 2011's *Curiouser and Curiouser: Challenging Conventions and Celebrating the Unusual*, our goal was to create a conference with a topical, innovative theme which would be broad enough to attract a wide range of participants, but strong enough to help facilitate a sustained and coherent discussion. Our vision was to provide an open, supportive and democratic environment in which postgraduate students and scholars from various disciplines as well as museum professionals could come together to share their research, knowledge and expertise from a variety of perspectives.

Our Call for Papers was extremely well-received and attracted a diverse array of abstracts on a great variety of themes; some familiar, and others entirely unexpected. What emerged from the two days of the conference was a fascinating dialogue between a group of emerging and established scholars, academics and professionals which transported us from a lost museum of Rhineland history conceived in 1920s Cologne to communicating the Ice Age to child visitors in present-day Croatia, to challenging and developing our preconceptions of the ultimate nature and purpose of the future museum in a group-led workshop. Papers approached subjects as diverse as architecture, mental health, digital media, art, linguistics, urban regeneration, audience participation, human rights, religion, literature and the human imagination.

While unfortunately our external keynote speaker, Dr. Bernadette Lynch, was unable to attend on Day 2 due to ill health, we were indebted to Dr. Janet Marstine, Academic Director and Programme Director for Art Museum and Gallery Studies at the School of Museum Studies, for kindly stepping into the breach at the last minute and sharing some of her ongoing and extremely relevant research into museums and the concept of transparency.

Organising and participating in this conference taught us a number of valuable lessons. Foremost of these is that in the end, the Utopian museum (or conference!) is not about achieving perfection, but about challenging the status quo and refusing to accept that things cannot be better, or different. Utopia is a journey, not a final destination. I hope that you will enjoy the fruits of our shared odyssey into museal realms both known and unknown.

Stephanie Bowry

PhD Student and Principal Organiser of *Museum Utopias*

On behalf of the 2012 Conference Team
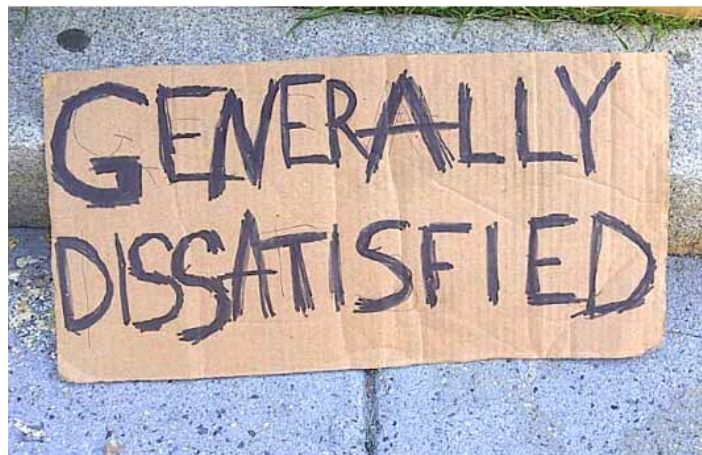
One of the posters spotted at an Occupy Rally in the USA

Generally dissatisfied with the utopian museum

Dr Bernadette Lynch[1]

An elderly Chinese woman stood at the far end of a room at a consultation session at a large UK museum and asked *why* the museum wanted to engage communities. She said, 'What is it for? What is it you want to *do* to me?'[i]

The utopian rhetoric of mutuality and shared authority in today's museums, in reality, places a community member, such as this woman, in the role of 'supplicant' or 'beneficiary'. Museums and galleries continue to subtly maintain inequitable social relations by exercising invisible power, setting parameters that offer what Cornwall calls 'empowerment-lite' (Cornwall, 2008).[ii] Thus the image of the 21st century, democratic, dialogical museum simply does not match the rhetoric. Furthermore, by placing people in the position of beneficiaries, the museum continues to rob people of their active agency and the necessary possibility of *resistance*.[iii] This would explain the anger of many participants who express frustration with these well-meaning institutions.[iv]

Carl Schmitt attacked *liberal-neutralist* and *utopian* notions that removes the 'political' in social relations in civil society, arguing that conflict is embedded in existence itself (Schmitt, 1927).[v] The institution can only break free if it acknowledges conflict and instigates a form of reciprocity that allows the institution to be challenged, and to challenge back! Two types of reciprocity are therefore in play – the utopian in which our well-meaning responsibility for the other leads to their disempowerment as 'beneficiaries' and the one in

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which the museum – and its community partners – may be challenged, thus leading to a more equitable partnership, and the possibility for people to assume new roles as 'active agents'. Is this utopian? For the social relevance of the museum, it is a reality that has to be achieved.

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[i] The workshop was part of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's UK-wide research project, led by author, Dr Bernadette Lynch. 'Engagement at the heart of museums and galleries' examined public participation in 12 leading UK museums and galleries, and found overwhelming evidence that despite best intentions, all is not well. Working with groups comprised of staff and community partners, it reviewed the obstacles to engagement. Through the *Our Museum* programme, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation is now focusing on organisational development to help these institutions change their organisational culture, as models for the sector as a whole. See Lynch, B. (2011) *Whose Cake is it Anyway?: A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in twelve museums and galleries in the UK,* The Paul Hamlyn Foundation: phf.org.uk. For information on the Our Museums programmes, see http://ourmuseum.ning.com.
[ii] Cornwall, A. (2008) *Democratising Engagement: What the UK can Learn from International Experience*. London: Demos. Available at www.demos.co.uk/publications/democratisingengagement.
[iii] Some of this is explored further in Lynch and Alberti (2010) where we break this process down through the example of an attempt at co-creating an exhibition. Lynch, B. T. and Alberti, S.J.M.M. (2010) "Legacies of prejudice: racism, co-production and radical trust in the museum", *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 25:1, 13 - 35. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09647770903529061.
[iv] A relatively recent and still painful experience of antagonism, for which they were unprepared, hit UK museums during the 2007 Bicentenary of Britain's Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. There were high expectations amongst Black and Ethnic Minority communities of full collaboration in developing related museum programmes. Yet, one museum professional summarized the views of many when she said that 'consultation was not even an accurate description of what in fact took place'. Of the various evaluative reports on the impact of the Bicentenary on UK museums, the most thorough and revealing research produced on the subject is the '1807 Commemorated' project, led by Laurajane Smith and Geoff Cubitt of the University of York, UK. Available: www.history.ac.uk/1807/commemorated (Accessed: 7 January 2013).
[v] Schmitt, C. 2007 (1927), *The Concept of the Political,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The Rhineland Museum of 1925. The Short Life of a Grand Plan

Katrin Hieke

Abstract

In 1925, the mayor of Cologne, Konrad Adenauer, announced the creation of a brand new museum. It was to present the Rhineland, a loosely-defined region in the western part of Germany. In the following years, an appointed commission developed a concept for the museum. Since there was no collection to consider, nor a building or anything else apart from the preferably glamorous presentation of the history of the Rhineland, a subjective yet ideal plan of what was to be presented and how was soon created. Nevertheless, over the following years, it was slowly shaped by the pressures of reality: financial constraints, interests of institutions and individuals involved, the tactics of politicians and museum directors – or the realisation that certain topics could not be presented in an appropriate way and were therefore to be left out. The museum that finally opened in 1936 was – also due to the political changes since 1933 – something quite different from the initial ideal. However, what did derive was widely referred to as a model museum, honoured the following year with a gold medal at the World Exhibition in Paris for its cutting-edge approach. Despite this, after the destruction of the building complex in World War II it was decided that this museum, unlike all the other museums in Cologne, would not be founded anew.

This paper traces the story of the Rhineland Museum from its beginnings in 1925 through the famous, gold-winning reality of 1937 down to the early 1940s, when it disappeared, not only physically, but also from people's memories and from professional discourse, with the exception of only a few, faint traces.

Keywords: Museum history, ideal museum, Germany 1920s-1940s, regional identity

An idea is born

Behind all the innovations and cultural movements, the 1920s, which, looking back, are often described as the 'Golden Twenties', were nevertheless an extremely turbulent era. This applied for the whole of Europe, and in particular in the case of the Rhine Province, a region on the western edge of Germany[i], marked by the Treaty of Versailles with the occupation of the region, pro-French 'cultural propaganda', separatist unrest and, finally, the Ruhr crisis, inflation and the global economic crisis.[ii]

In the Rhine Province, the politically and economically tense situation resulted in the formation of a new and stronger sense of community. The historical importance of the Province and its place in national as well as international history – whether fact or myth – attained during these years an emphasis and attention never previously seen. The continuing occupation by allied troops and the separatist movements accompanying it were central to the increased controversy surrounding the concepts of nation, identity and the political allegiance

of the Rhine Province.[iii]

Among other factors, this manifested itself in the 'Millennial Celebrations of the Rhineland' (*Jahrtausendfeiern der Rheinlande*) celebrated in 1925 throughout the entire region and even beyond (Cepl-Kaufmann, 2009). With hundreds of events and exhibitions, an assertive and proud Rhine Province demonstrated its adherence to the German Reich, though not without drawing attention to its large and varied contribution to the prosperity of the nation. The great success of these celebrations, measured by the number of visitors and the wide public attention, both national and international, culminated in the political declaration of an intent to establish a permanent museum under the title *Rheinisches Museum*. This was to be devoted to the 'museal presentation of the entire cultural development of the Rhineland' (Ewald, 1926: 1).

In addition, Cologne had a highly active mayor at that time, in the person of Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967), for whom the development of culture, education and science was closely linked to his objectives with regard to local development and economic policies (Düwell, 2004: 120). The city was hence to become an intellectual and economic link in the chain joining Germany with the western democracies, as well as a genuinely Rhenish metropolis. It is thus not surprising that such publicity magnets and economically and (at least superficially) educationally effective tools as the 'Millennial Celebrations of the Rhineland' and especially the 'Millennial Exhibition' held in Cologne, were seized upon and eventually culminated in the plan to found a museum. A museum seemed to be the suitable medium to carry out such an obviously politically motivated project. More detailed plans or concepts concerning the precise content, design or location, were non-existent; this was left in the hands of a few specialists – who were therefore able, in a relatively free way, to develop their concept for the museum.

In the 1920s, Cologne had an already established and renowned museum scene; the oldest museum – the *Wallraf Richartz Museum* – dated back to 1824. However, almost all of them were running low on both financial and human resources as well as facilities to host the collections, among them the *Historisches Museum der Stadt Köln (*Historical Museum of the City of Cologne), founded 1888. Thus, the plans to create yet another museum were received far less enthusiastically by the public and the opposition Socialist party, who in vain pointed to more pressing duties of the municipality (Düwell, 2004: 146).

Many museums in Germany at this time – especially the local folk museums, which were increasingly founded in the challenging interwar period, as well as established institutions like the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg – portrayed to varying

degrees the underlying concepts of regional or national identity (Arand, 2002; Bott, 1992). Furthermore, the 1920s witnessed the founding of the *Deutsche Museum* in Munich and the *Hygiene Museum* in Dresden, both representing modern museum types and implementing new approaches especially in terms of didactic innovations (Füßl and Trischler, 2003; Vogel, 2003). In the Rhine Province, major populist exhibitions were organised that attracted both international attention and a huge number of visitors: the *Millennial Exhibition* in 1925, already mentioned above, the *Pressa* (International Press Exhibition) in 1928 and the *GESOLEI* (*Gesundheit, Soziale Fürsorge, Leibesübungen*) (Health, Social Care and Sports) two years earlier (Internationale Presse-Ausstellung Köln, 1928; Körner and Stercken, 2002). The latter, especially, was significant for the development of the Rhineland Museum in terms of exhibition technology and didactics, as heavy use was made of the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics (now often referred to as Isotype), which in turn had just been developed at the *Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum Wien* (Social and Economic Museum of Vienna) by its director Otto Neurath (1882-1945) (Kräutler, 2008).

The museum ideal[iv]

During the very same year in which the 'Millennial Celebrations of the Rhineland' were held, Konrad Adenauer commissioned a *Denkschrift* (memorandum) describing content and objectives of the new museum. It became available in 1926 (Ewald, 1926) and was written by Wilhelm Ewald (1878-1955), the already appointed director of the new museum, who had been responsible for the *Millennial Exhibition* and had, only a year previously, become director of the Historical Museum of the City of Cologne (Brill, 1965: 13). Over the following years, other Cologne museum directors and university professors became involved both in conceptual work and in practical application. A second memorandum which was more detailed – and feasible – dates from this phase (Witte, Ewald, With and Buchner, 1931).

It is not surprising that the initial plans were conceived on a grand scale: as regards content alone, they demanded no more and no less than a presentation of all developments from prehistory up to the immediate present, whereby the Rhineland was to be considered, at least in the departments of geography and geology, flora and fauna, in the widest geographical sense. Political, ecclesiastic, social and economic developments were to be further themes (Ewald, 1926: 3-4). All together, a historical completeness was aimed at which had never been realised before in such a comprehensive panorama. Although most museums at that time were, in broad terms, either institutions of public education or 'scholarly rooms' for scientific work and study, the Rhineland Museum, quite in harmony

with the ideals of Konrad Adenauer (Düwell, 2004: 153), was to be one of the first to be both simultaneously (Ewald, 1926: 1-2).

The didactic considerations with which this was to be achieved were weighted accordingly. The makers of the museum were particularly devoted to an uninterrupted assessment reflecting a linear progress of the development of the Rhine Province in the best possible way, supporting the prevailing concepts of regional identity at that time (Ewald, 1926: 1). While the museum and its permanent collection were to be linked up to a number of institute-like study collections under the same roof, the museum itself was to become a complementary scientific institute for all universities in the Rhine Province. It saw itself as a central research establishment devoted to the history of the Rhineland (Ewald, 1926: 2); nothing less than the future 'Central Rhenish Museum' (Brill, 1965: 16).

There are two main reasons why those writing out the concepts could get so close to what was presumed to be the museum ideal: (a) in contrast to so many other museums in the foundation stage, there was no pre-existing collection – though many objects in the *Millennial Exhibition* could have been used for the Rhineland Museum – and (b) there was not yet a building – and thus spatial restrictions - to accommodate the museum.

The museum formation

The years following the initial memorandum were marked by the concept being continuously modified and adapted to accommodate the reality of financial constraints, the interests of various institutions or persons involved, or simply for practical or professional reasons. As with many projects in the cultural sector, the Rhineland Museum was also affected by the difficult economic situation of the post-war years and the subsequent global economic crisis. The tight financial situation of the City of Cologne, the Rhine Province and other potential contributors resulted in changes to and restrictions of the original museum concept, despite the Rhineland Museum being given priority by the mayor in the fields of culture and education (Düwell, 2004: 146-147). The number of personnel involved was low, travel was – at least temporarily – restricted to a minimum, purchases and acquisitions from the museum budget were subject to approval by the city's authorities, and the items for display in the exhibitions had to be produced as cheaply as possible (Meerfeld, 1927).

Due to the demand for completeness and absolute continuity in the lines of development to be exhibited, the demand for originals was relegated to secondary importance, meaning that copies and plaster casts as well as instructive models were preferred (Ewald, 1926: 1) (figures 1-3 show examples of correspondingly designed

exhibition spaces at the museum). This kind of exhibition presentation was in line with a movement of that time, which considered the public education goals to be more important than the authenticity of the exhibits.[v]

Figure 1. Permanent exhibition at the agricultural department, *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, about 1937
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln/ M. Wiedmann

Figure 2. Exhibition hall of the Rhine bridges, *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, about 1937
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

Figure 3. Exhibition hall with town models, *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, about 1937
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

As such, it was possible to circumvent the constantly arising competitive situation with the cultural historical museums already established in the Rhine area, especially the two great provincial museums of Bonn and Trier, which could thus maintain their regional rights of acquisition, especially in the context of archaeological finds. Financial restrictions, competitors and ever-increasing delays were probably also reasons why the memorandum of 1931 suggested integrating some already existing collections from elsewhere in Cologne into the Rhineland Museum's exhibitions (material was not only borrowed from other museums but also from various municipal departments, such as models created by the building authority or plans by the parks & gardens department). At the same time this all contributed to attempts to restructure the crisis-ridden museum landscape of Cologne (Witte et al, 1931: 8-9).

As Wilhelm Ewald was also director of the overfilled Historical Museum of the City of Cologne, the two museums and their collections gradually merged into each other, using part of the older collection to represent the city prominently in several departments of the Rhineland Museum, but subsequently leading to a substantial limitation in content presented at the Historical Museum itself. For a short time, the museum project was therefore running under the title 'Rhenish and Historical Museum' (Brill, 1965: 14-16).

The fields of interest and the working range of the Rhineland Museum in general experienced significant changes during its development, most of them due to pragmatic reasons. Although the original concept intended to throw light on the entire course of the Rhine, from its source down to the North Sea regardless of political boundaries, and to cover all the other politically, culturally or economically related regions, the plans involved in the

conception and presentation of exhibits became increasingly restricted to the political Rhine Province (plus in some respect parts of the Province of Hesse-Nassau in the East) (Witte et al, 1931; Brill, 1965: 21).

As can be noted through a comparison of the concepts laid out in both memorandums of 1926 and 1931 and the description of the museum at its opening (*Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, 1936), a number of the study collections and their affiliated research institutes were never realised. As, however, all these changes were practically invisible from the outside, they did not restrict the principally political objectives regarding the presentation of the history of the Rhineland in any way, neither before nor after the National Socialists seized power.

The deviations from the original concept and ideal also arose both from the commission and the museum developers themselves, who, knowingly or unknowingly, manoeuvred their own research interests into the foreground, thus attracting greater attention and finding a wider scope for their ideas. For instance, the original plans were, mainly for didactic reasons, to trace a chronological route through the museum starting with items from the Geology, Geography and the Prehistory departments (Ewald, 1926: 4; Witte et al, 1931: 2-3). However, none of the directors and professors participating had any research specialisations in these fields. Furthermore, doubts arose as to whether these departments, whose objects appeared to be far less 'spectacular' than those of other departments, would be able to provide the intended dramatic take-off to the itinerary (Clemen, 1932). The official rationale provided for why these departments were not represented in the long run, was that those collections were already existing and accessible to the public elsewhere and therefore should remain in their original museums (Witte et al, 1931: 8). When the museum finally opened in 1936, visitors started their tour in the historical political department where, beginning in 800 AD, the history of the German kings and rulers of the Rhineland was presented (Haus der Rheinischen Heimat, 1936: 4).

The question of location was decided at the latest two years after the publication of the first memorandum in 1926. The Rhineland museum was to be accommodated in converted former cuirassier barracks located at a site of high symbolic importance: in the heart of Cologne's city centre, on the banks of the Rhine and just opposite the famous Cathedral (Bender, 1936) (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Aerial view of the future Rhineland Museum, 1928
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln/ Junkers Luftbild

The classicist building with two wings featured an impressive 200 meter long riverfront, 10,000 square meters of floor space and an additional 4,000 square meters to be used as depot (Brill, 1965: 16, 24). The memorandum of 1931 took the then set premises into consideration and in general presented a more realistic concept in terms of feasibility, also because time was pressing, as was the need to finally present results.

The first museum concept did not have to be developed in terms of spatial constraints, visitor management, or lighting conditions. However, since the construction of a new museum was never seriously considered, those adaptations of the concept had to be expected. It would have been very interesting to see how the initial idealistic museum concept could have found its expression in an ideal museum architecture. But such plans were apparently never followed up; at least no corresponding sources have been found. We are thus only able to speculate whether, in line with the spirit of the time and with public education being the openly expressed objective, preference would have been given to maybe a simple building or instead a more spectacular one, which would have acted as a temple to the Rhine Province.

The award-winning museum

The museum which finally opened in 1936 was – also on the basis of the changed political situation since 1933 – something fundamentally different to the original ideal as laid out in writing. The National Socialists recognised the advantages of instrumentalising this institution for propaganda purposes and continued to develop the museum with further changes. A comprehensive historical and political department was included, which presented development up to the present day – though a part of this and some of the socio-economic

topics were not yet finished at the time of opening (Brill, 1965: 22). Being one of the first museums in the field of cultural history to apply an interdisciplinary approach, the Rhineland Museum integrated another four adjoining themes, namely 'The Church and the Ecclesiastical Orders', 'The Rhenish Cities and their Citizens', 'The Rhenish Peasantry' and 'The Rhenish Economy and its Workers' (Haus der Rheinischen Heimat, 1936: 13-14). When it opened, the museum consisted of exhibition rooms and administrative offices, some institute facilities (the graphic and numismatic collection, the pictorial archive with a photo studio as well as the library), workshop spaces for restoration and modelling and halls for temporary exhibitions and teaching (Brill, 1965: 24).

Education gained an ever-increasing importance over other museum functions such as research and collecting. Franz Brill (1901-1970), one of the museum employees at the time and successor of Wilhelm Ewald as director of the Historical Museum of the City of Cologne after World War II, later described the museum programme as being well in line with the National Socialist movement, which saw this new museum type as a great opportunity to present itself as being able to take care of its 'people and homeland' (Brill, 1965: 21). The new name *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, which can be roughly translated as House of the Rhenish Homeland, reflected the shift in emphasis: the title 'museum' was considered to be out of date and therefore any notion of the conventional historical museum was replaced by 'house'. This term depicted an active centre alive to the needs of the community and general public, coupled with a greater emphasis on the increasingly important National Socialist concept of 'homeland' (*Heimat*) (Rheinland in Wort und Bild, 1940: 10).

Nevertheless, this museum concept was able to provide, not only on a national but also an international basis, an exemplary museum model which was crowned with success by being awarded a Gold Medal at the Paris World Exhibition in 1937 (Brill, 1965: 20; Alexander, 1992). At the international exhibition of modern museum types, three German museums were represented: in addition to the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, the *Pergamon Museum* and the *Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum* (today the *Bode Museum*, both in Berlin) also participated. From our museum, a partial model of the room in which the development of the Rhenish cities was illustrated using city models was shown in a diorama as well as a model of the Constitution and Administration hall (Alexander, 1992: 91-92) (see figures 3 and 5).

Figure 5. Model of the exhibition hall Constitution and Administration at the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat,* about 1937 © Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

The modern exhibition architecture and the wide use of didactic presentation media such as models, casts and illustrative placards based on the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics were particularly responsible for the international recognition received (Brill, 1965: 17). The latter was used widely throughout the museum to explain – in a clear, effective and easy way – substantial correlations, relationships and developments in a huge range of subjects (Brill, 1965: 20), for example: the Evolution of the table or the Distribution of fertilisers in the Rhine Province, to name only two. Original objects displayed were mainly 'typical specimens' of bourgeois and peasant lifestyles and often included whole ensembles such as living rooms and a hall (see figure 6), operable paper mills and various workshops. In addition, there were hundreds of models of houses, churches, castles, rural settlements and farms; plastic models of Rhenish livestock; ship models showing the development of navigation on the Rhine and Rhine bridges (see figure 2); metal replicas of historic silver objects; paintings and copies of paintings.

Figure 6. Exhibit of an original baroque entrance hall, *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat*, 1937
© Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

Due to the limitations of content and time periods to be considered at the Rhineland Museum, surplus items and archaeological Roman and Frankish objects became available for barter (Brill, 1965: 17-18, 20). In fact, the museum described itself as a 'methodically entirely new type of museum', because all modern technical means available at that time were deployed (Haus der Rheinischen Heimat, 1936: 12).

The lost museum

In spite of this (questionable) success, it was decided not to restore the museum after the end of the Second World War, in contrast to all other Cologne museums (Borger, 1990: 49). Large parts of the former barracks had been destroyed, though the majority of the collections had in anticipation been brought into safe storage (Brill, 1965: 26). Starting at the outbreak of war in 1939, objects were increasingly replaced by photographs of the objects, copies or other, less valuable objects (Brill, 1965: 26). Also, during this time, the museum hosted various propagandistic exhibitions (Alexander, 1992: 98).

The museum concepts – the original of 1925, its revision of 1931 and that adapted by the National Socialists – appeared to be out of date in every aspect. We are not far off in assuming that, on the one hand, the older Cologne museums, all of which were founded by bourgeois initiatives, were anchored more deeply in the community and hence had a more powerful lobby. There was also surely a great need to take distance from an institution that had been instrumentalised to such an extent over the preceding decade. In addition, Franz Brill (1965: 28-29) reports that the prevailing wish was to concentrate again more on the history of the city itself rather than on the region. After they were returned from depots in

Southern Germany by 1950, the majority of the objects were handed over to the Historical Museum of the City of Cologne, which had been most closely associated with the Rhineland Museum, latterly *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat.* It was, as Franz Brill put it, the only option given the nature of the objects and the space and funding available (Brill, 1965: 28-29). It became a museum project among many in the city. The Rhine Province itself merged into the new federal state of North Rhine – Westphalia.

The first exhibition after the war took place in 1953 and presented some significant milestones of the history of the city of Cologne (Brill, 1965: 18). Judging by the small museum catalogue (Rheinisches und Historisches Museum der Stadt Köln, 1953) and, more importantly, some photographs of the exhibition, hardly any display boards, illustrative placards or copies were used and only some models. The focus had shifted, once again, to the display of original, 'real' items. Presumably, they were considered to be more reliable than didactic means, as these had been used more openly to support certain political objectives and interpretations.

Conclusion

What remains, in a physical sense and in museological discourse, of a museum ideal, (an ideal museum originating in the innovative 1920s and the model of a museum), which was even capable of obtaining considerable success at the World Exhibition? Surprisingly, very little. Contrary to the professional attention devoted to the museum while it lasted (judging by the voluminous folders of correspondence as seen at the Archive), there was nearly no form of critical discussion about the concept and how it was put into practice in the relevant literature after the Second World War. Furthermore, the history of this museum was never comprehensively documented.[vi]

Due to the collapse of the archive, it is not currently possible – and will not be so at least for the next few years – to investigate any professional correspondence on the subject. So far only a very few traces are known. For instance, the French museologist Georges-Henri Rivière (1897–1985) refers to the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat* as one of the museums that inspired him in the creation of a concept for a visitor-oriented, up-to-date museum (Roth, 1990: 144). Still today museums seem to be the means of choice when it comes to strengthening a collective identity of a specific area or nation. Recently, for example, both the Netherlands and France pursued the idea of creating National History Museums. However, both projects have meanwhile been cancelled for different reasons (Nationaal Historisch Museum, 2012; Evin, 2012).

These sources and other possible impacts on museums and their concepts, and thus the significance of the Rhineland Museum and especially the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat* within the museological discourse, are the subjects of further studies as part of the thesis project.

Studying the history of museums, not only at a particular time in their history but over the whole period of their formation and development, provides valuable insights into the diverse contexts and processes affecting the planning and construction of the institutions. Museum projects are highly dependent on their respective historical, social, political and professional contexts. They are – at times very short-lived – manifestations of prevailing ideas of a specific time. Historical sources, especially all the internal working papers, notes, and correspondence, help to shed light on these processes of developing and discarding ideas, on interdependencies and interactions with the outside world and within the institutions, and most notably on the differences between written concepts and actual implementation. Ultimately, they help to understand not only how museums became what they were, but also what they are today.

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_i   This study will discuss the 'Rhineland' as well as the 'Rhine Province'. Here, the term *Rheinland* (Rhineland) refers to a non-specific geographic and/or cultural area situated on the right and left banks of the Rhine, which can be understood (in its most comprehensive form) as reaching from the Rhine source down to the North Sea. Often, the term *Rheinland* serves as synonym for the former political region, i.e. the Rhine Province, a specific geopolitical area along the Lower Rhine, of which the major part is nowadays incorporated in the Federal German State (Land) of North Rhine – Westphalia (*Nordrhein-Westfalen*). The earlier term *Rheinlande* (the Lands of the Rhine) was an emotionally charged political concept and is now only used, if at all, poetically. Finally, the term *Rhenish* applies in the widest sense to the river Rhine (as: Rhenish confederation, Rhenish wine etc.). Although the literal translation of the museum name *Rheinisches Museum* would be Rhenish Museum, its idea is better expressed in the term Rhineland Museum, which is therefore used here.

_{ii}   Many publications exist on the history of the Rhineland/ Rhine Province. For a comprehensive overview, see Engelbrecht (1994) and Kastner and Torunsky (1987).

_{iii}   Especially in recent decades, extensive studies on regional identity in the Rhineland in the interwar period have been published. See inter alia Bouresh et al, 1997.

_{iv}   The history of the Rhineland Museum and its possible role as a model museum in the 1930s and early 1940s is the subject of the author's doctoral thesis at the *Ludwig Uhland Institute of Empirical Cultural Science at the University of Tübingen*. Apart from the secondary sources on the history of the Rhine Province and the contemporary museum landscape, the thesis, like this study, is based on some several hundred, though mainly unlabelled, photographic copies from the Pictorial Archive of the Rhineland (*Rheinisches Bildarchiv)* depicting the museum's interior and exterior at different times. It is also based in particular on the comprehensive and original administrative documents related to the museum which belong to the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne (*Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln)*. Unfortunately, these had not yet been completely studied by the author when the archive collapsed in 2009.

Those documents represented just a partial selection made by different actors; the museum staff, administration bodies as well as the archivists of several decades decided what was worth keeping - and what was not. Nevertheless, this is one of the rare cases where comprehensive documents exist not only about the museum at a given time (usually the opening or anniversaries), but also on the planning and construction phase - quite remarkable given the chaos of the war and post-war years.

It is hoped that the records have survived the collapse and will after their restoration be accessible again. A number of investigations will therefore remain fragmentary – though hopefully, however, on a temporary basis only.

_v   One of the most significant debates about the dichotomy of the original and its reproduction in Germany at that time revolved around Alexander Dorner (1893-1957) at the *Provinzialmuseum Hannover (*Provincial Museum of Hannover), and especially the 1929 exhibition *Original and Facsimile* (Flacke-Knoch, 1985).

_{vi}   Up to now, mainly only Beatrix Alexander (*Kölnisches Stadtmuseum*/ City Museum of Cologne) has dealt with the history of the Rhineland Museum, latterly *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat,* including the presentation at the Paris World Exhibition (Alexander, 1992) as well as the important subject of origin and whereabouts of art objects from the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat* between 1938 and 1945 (Alexander, 2001). A history of the *Kölnisches Stadtmuseum*, which is partly also a history of the Rhineland Museum and the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat,* is in preparation.

Invisible Museums and Multiple Utopias

Elee S. Kirk & Will Buckingham

Abstract

In Calvino's novel Invisible Cities, the traveller Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan tales of the various cities of his empire, which the Khan himself will never visit. In this paper we draw a model from Calvino's novel to explore those aspects of museum experience that are almost invisible to museum professionals. Drawing on empirical research, we argue that, as experienced by visitors, any one museum is not single but a multiplicity of deeply personal, and largely invisible, utopian spaces. At the end of Invisible Cities, Polo talks of the 'infernal city', the antithesis of utopia. Escaping this city is a matter of giving space to things that are not of the inferno, to invisible utopias, that they might endure. We argue that the museum is a place where these invisible utopias may be given space; and that the challenge for museum professionals is to guard these invisible museums that they—like the Khan—will never see.

Introduction

This paper grew out of a conviction that museums are, for many of those who visit them, the authors of this present paper included, *already* utopian spaces; and yet attempts to articulate the precise nature of these utopian spaces can often founder, because they somehow miss what it is about these spaces that make them truly utopian. The notion of a utopian space is one that already contains a contradiction or even a paradox: the contradiction between u-topia as 'no place' and eu-topia as 'happy place'. It is our contention here that museum eu-topias, what one might call the 'happy places' of museum visitors, are often to a large extent also u-topias, 'no places', in that the individual pleasures and delights of museum visitors are often fleeting, personal, multiple, invisible and exceedingly difficult to track or to pin down.

Of the authors of this paper, one of us is a novelist and philosopher, the other a museum professional and researcher. Between us, we want to make what may perhaps be a rather strange and unruly proposal: to suggest that one way of glimpsing this multiplicity of fleeting, quicksilver, intimate and often very private utopias may be by drawing upon a conceptual framework that comes not from the world of sociological or museological research, but instead from a work of fiction. So in what follows, we are going to put to work the novel *Invisible Cities,* by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, as a means of helping us think differently about the museum as a utopian space; and we are going to see how this, in conjunction with empirical research, may point towards, even if it cannot fully describe or capture, the utopian

quality of museums. Finally, in the light of this, towards the end of the paper we intend to make some broader recommendations about museum governance and the importance of maintaining the museum as a utopian space.

This blend of empirical research, storytelling, philosophy and policy recommendations may, at the outset, seem like a curious kind of hybrid. And yet *Invisible Cities*, the novel we are using to help frame our questions, could itself be seen as a book about research methodologies. It is a book that suggests that, when it comes to advice for those involved in governance, sometimes more unorthodox methods of argumentation and exploration are necessary.

Utopian Museums

Museums *matter*. They matter to us, the authors of this paper; and it seems clear that they also matter to others. Yet when it comes to articulating the precise quality of this mattering, things become a little more difficult. Of course, museums engage in visitor research. Armies of friendly people with clipboards roam around asking if visitors have five minutes to spare to answer some questions. People fill in evaluations and comment cards, or join focus-groups. Museums, which were—the story goes—once bastions of aloofness, have now become shared, participatory spaces, places of community, arenas where it is possible for our voices to be heard. Nevertheless, it can sometimes seem that this mass of evaluation, this frenzied participation, fails to get to the heart of the mattering of museums. And one reason for this, perhaps, is that there are many things about museums and our relationship with these places that are too private—too intimate, too quirky, too personal, too strange and too quiet—to ever enter into these kinds of participatory arenas, or to register on any questionnaires. So what we want to try to do here is get a glimpse of those things that we *don't* say about our experiences of museums, perhaps even those things that we don't know how to say—even though these very things may, at the same time, make up a large part of the museum's mattering to us.

If, as we are suggesting, for many visitors museums are already utopian spaces, it is perhaps precisely in the sense of this paradoxical notion of utopia as that happy place which cannot be found on any known map, or for that matter on any known questionnaire. The utopian museum experiences that we are interested in exploring here are frequently deeply private, intimate, often fleeting, and inherently difficult to articulate within a broader narrative. In other words, if we were to say that being in a particular museum at a particular time mattered deeply to us, the precise quality of this mattering, the many intimacies out of which this mattering was built, might not be something we could fully describe or explain.

We could have a stab at it if pressed, no doubt; but much of this mattering would remain forever invisible, hidden beneath the surface.

Invisible Museums

In Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (Calvino, 1974), the ruler of all China, Kublai Khan, presses the Venetian traveller Marco Polo to tell him about the cities of his empire, cities the Khan himself may never visit. The Khan, like all rulers (that is to say, like politicians, like museum directors, like managers of all kinds), is in the paradoxical situation of having jurisdiction over something that he can never know in its entirety. He has many people at his disposal: advisors, census-takers, armies of assistants with clip-boards, spies, officials, clerks. He has endless quantities of data, population statistics, news of famine and abundance. All these things are no doubt vital for a politician or an Emperor, or even a museum director. They are not trivial. He could not do without them. But the question that Calvino asks in his novel, with considerable acuity, is this: does this mass of data, taken together, really add up to knowledge of the empire? Is there not something that is missing from this data, something that is always going to be missing precisely because it is, by its very nature, invisible? As the Khan finds himself wondering, whilst talking to the traveller Polo, was there not perhaps, for every event or piece of news, a 'space that remained around it, a void not filled with words' (Calvino 1974: 38)?

It is precisely for this reason that he employs the Venetian, the unreliable storyteller who spins tales about cities that are strange, impractical or impossible, cities with improbable names, cities in which the Khan does not fully believe, even though he listens to the traveller 'with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his' (Ibid.: 5).

Calvino's book, in other words, is about epistemology. It is about how we can know an empire or, for that matter, how we can know anything at all: a country, a city, a university, a museum. What constitutes adequate knowledge of these places?

There are, in fact, two kinds of knowing at play in the novel: the knowledge the Khan possesses, and the knowledge possessed by Marco Polo. For his part, the Khan thinks in terms of norms and principles. 'I have constructed in my mind,' he says, 'a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced… It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degree from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations' (Op. Cit.: 69). Marco, however, has a very different approach to knowing, as he then goes on to explain to the Khan.

> I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others… It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. So I only have to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist (Op. Cit.: 69).

This pataphysical 'city of exceptions' is not, unlike the cities imagined by the Khan, a city that is constructed 'top-down', by conjuring an ideal city, and then tweaking this ideal until it fits with a real existent city; it is instead a city that is built up of a mass of particular and unique experiences.

Having set out this idea of knowledge as an accumulation of exceptions, and knowledge as a system of principles, Calvino's book navigates repeatedly between the two. As the book proceeds, what the Khan eventually has the wisdom to recognise is this: that the knowledge proper to running his empire lies *neither* in principles *nor* in exceptions, but instead in the ability to move between one and the other.

What we want to suggest here is that, to help guard the many often invisible but nonetheless utopian spaces of the museum, at least one role museum researchers can play is that of Marco Polo to the Kublai Khans of instrumental policy. Every museum is an institution, a set of procedures and structures, a physical thing in the world; but it is also the site of innumerable invisible museums, countless secret pathways and many hidden personal utopias. Museum researchers, then, may have a valuable role in reminding those who are in power of the existence of these innumerable invisible museums that the Khans themselves will never visit or even be able to find on the maps of their empires. They may be able to point towards the existence of these many invisible museums, this accumulation of exceptions, even if these invisible museums cannot, by their nature, ever be fully articulated or described. In other words, whilst it is not possible to map the complete territory of all these invisible museums, nevertheless through empirical research it is possible to gain multiple glimpses of the many utopias that make up the space of the museum—as the research undertaken by Elee Kirk in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, and described by her in the next section suggests.

Collecting stories

In 2011, I spent several weeks carrying out research in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, talking to four- and five-year-old children about their experiences of the museum. In an attempt to trace the children's pathways through the museum and to gain an insight into their experiences, I recruited suitable families as they came in, and asked the children to use my digital camera to photograph things they found interesting. I then met up with the children once they'd finished, so that we could look at the pictures together and use them as a way of talking about their visit.

In all, I spoke with 32 children, who between them took around 1,600 photographs. What was most astonishing was the range, depth, and individuality of the children's experiences, as revealed through both their photographs and our discussions about them. Young children often find it particularly hard to remember and articulate past experiences, but in the case of this research, the photographs helped both to remind the children of their experience whilst also providing a second source of data in addition to the children's own words—a visual language with which they were able to express themselves. Although some significant general patterns and principles have emerged from this mass of data, at the same time I continue to be struck by the differences between the *textures* of the children's unfolding experiences of the museum. A researcher, as we have said, must be both Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; and so here I want to leave the more general patterns, interesting as they are, to one side and instead play the part of Polo, to focus more on this question of the multiplicity of museum experience. To do so, I will introduce you to three of these children, as a way of sketching out how this one museum, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History can also be seen as a layering of multiple 'invisible' museums: that is to say, a layering of a multiplicity of experiences that are hard to co-ordinate into a single, overall 'map' of the empire that is the museum.

Fred

Fred was five years old and he was visiting the museum with his mother who taught children his age, but at a different school to Fred. They were visiting the museum together to see if her class would like to go there on a school trip. What was immediately striking about Fred when I spoke with him was that, although clearly aware that the animals were not 'alive', he nevertheless talked about the museum as a place that was filled with intentions, purposes and dramas. He told me that the white rabbit in an Alice in Wonderland themed display case 'stole

the watch', that the skeleton monkey 'looks like it's going to fight' the monkey with skin, and that one dinosaur was 'chasing another dinosaur'. He said that the snake 'looks nice' because it was 'holding its eggs… to keep them safe', and that he liked the bird because 'it looks like it's a woodpecker pecking the tree'. Even his more explicit knowledge of the animals he talked about was bound up with a concern for their intentions. For example, he told me that the deer was hiding and that he knew it was camouflaged because he had seen a television programme about it. His knowledge of notions such as 'camouflage' was expressed in terms of what the animals in question were up to. Instead of seeing the museum as a collection of 'specimens' or 'objects', the museum that Fred navigated was one of multiple dramas and interactions.

Figure 1. Two photographs of monkeys by Fred: 'it looks like it's going to fight that one'. Copyright E. S. Kirk.

Amy

The museum as Amy experienced it was a very different kind of place. Amy was just four years old, and was an enthusiastic photographer, taking 67 pictures during her hour-long visit. She took most of her pictures in the central court of the museum. While some of the pictures were of dinosaurs, dodos and a stuffed pony, a surprising number were of total strangers. It is not unusual for other visitors to be caught accidentally in the children's photographs, but, in Amy's case this seemed to be more deliberate. A total of 46 of her 67 photographs included people in them, and whilst in most children's photographs the people were in the background, in Amy's photographs the people were the subjects and the museum was merely the setting. When I spoke to Amy, it was clear that she was strongly aware of the museum as a place in which the most fascinating exhibits were often the other visitors. She told me she had photographed 'another child with… a daddy… because I thought they were very interesting'.

This enthusiasm for documentary photography included taking pictures both of members of her own family and complete strangers, for example, the series of 7 photographs that she took of an unknown couple looking at a display case and the large number of

photographs she took of her brother, mother and grandmother. This interest in other people even extended beyond other visitors, as somewhat unusually, Amy also took a number of photographs of portrait paintings that were exhibited in the museum, pictures that she was also keen to discuss in the interview.

Figure 2. Four photographs of strangers by Amy (note, faces have been blurred to protect the subjects' identities). Copyright E. S. Kirk.

Greg

Our final glimpse of an invisible museum comes from Greg. Greg was four years old, and a regular visitor to the museum, who seemed particularly drawn to those things that he, his family or people more broadly might find scary. Greg, like many of the children, was fascinated by sharp teeth. He photographed a plesiosaur which he described as having 'lots and lots of teeth' and a tyrannosaurus with 'very sharp teeth'. However, unlike some children in the museum, his interest in teeth seemed to have the character of a serious investigation of something that he clearly found unsettling. So, although he got very close to the teeth of the tyrannosaurus, he didn't quite pluck up the courage to touch them, as many other children tend to do, choosing instead to take a photograph.

Greg's visit to the museum also seemed to allow him to explore other personal fears. One of the photographs he wanted to talk to me about was of some rocks that glowed under ultraviolet light in a dark booth. He couldn't tell me much about the photograph, other than that the rock was glowing, but he seemed to find satisfaction in looking at it. His mother then told me that, although they had been to the museum many times before, this was the first time

that he'd been brave enough to go into the dark booth. Until recently, his mother said euphemistically, he had been 'unhappy in the dark'. Greg stressed that it had been *very* dark in the booth.

The last thing Greg told me, before running away to continue playing with his brother and friend, was that he had been to see the live tarantula. The particular appeal of this creature seemed to be that his mother was scared of spiders, so that her own phobia added to its fascination.
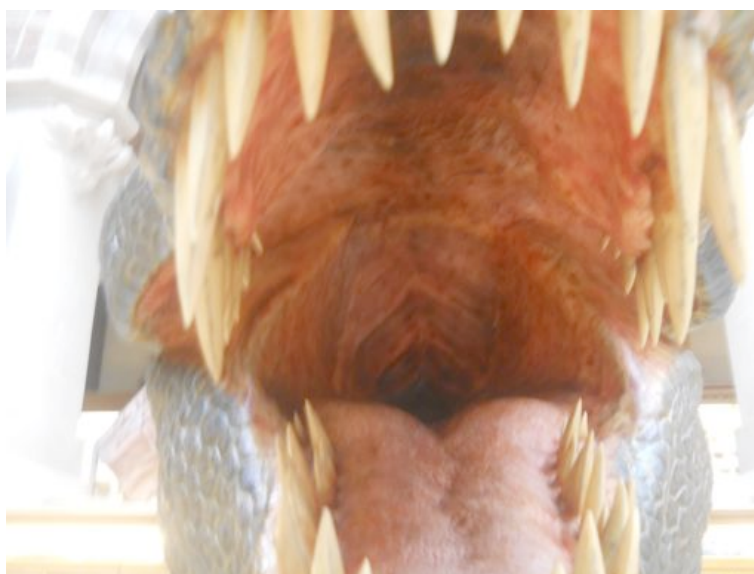

Figure 3. Tyrannosaurus teeth by Greg: 'it's got very sharp teeth'. Copyright E. S. Kirk.

Conclusion

Research such as this can allow us to glimpse—but perhaps no more than glimpse—the idiosyncratic, multiple and often rather private threads out of which the texture of the museum visit is woven. In a very real sense, Fred, Amy and Greg did not so much experience a single Oxford University Museum of Natural History as they each experienced a different invisible museum.

And so, whilst the use of the camera in this research can be seen to provide, both literally and figuratively, 'snapshots' of experience, and whilst the interviews allow us to draw out some of the significance of these fleeting snapshots, it would be a mistake, we believe, to claim that we have somehow in this fashion captured the 'visitor experience' in its entirety. Here it is important to stress that although we have managed to throw some light on the very different museum experiences of each of these young visitors (and there is no reason to believe that this diversity of experience does not hold for all museum visitors, whatever

their age), nevertheless, much of this experience will *always* remain invisible. It is not simply a matter of there being a multiplicity of museum experiences that could, in principle, be resolved into some kind of typology; it is also a matter of the way that experience itself tends to escape our attempts at capturing it and pinning it down in any definitive form. It slips through the nets of our categories. The reasons for this are several. Often, the questions we ask of visitors will, by their very nature, always elicit a relatively narrow range of responses and will only map onto actual experience in the most sketchy fashion. Frequently, due to the privacy and intimacy of experience, visitors may not be willing to talk about this experience to complete strangers. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, experience does not easily translate into language, or is even obscure to experiencers themselves. And then there is the question of the very real difference between experience itself and the reports that we might give of this experience after the fact. Finally, there is the inevitable question of the volume of information with which we are capable of dealing with: we neither can nor should we canvas every single visitor about the intimate depths of their museum experience.

Visitor studies matter. They matter in the same way that the many envoys of the Khan matter for him to be able to run his empire at all. We *do* need to know, as far as possible, what is going on. We need more information, and we need better information, if we care about our museums and about those who visit them. But, recalling the dialogues between the Khan and Marco Polo, the emperor and the storyteller, perhaps we also need to recognise the existence of those voids not filled with words, those spaces that we will never be able to fully map. Visitor studies can only ever capture *some* of the interactions and experiences of museum visitors. And it may turn out to be precisely in this vast realm of things that are frequently invisible to researchers that there is to be found much of the mattering of museums.

What, then, are the implications of this for those involved in museum governance? Here, at the end, we return to Calvino's book. *Invisible Cities* ends with an extraordinary passage in which the Khan asks Marco Polo about the infernal city, 'the last landing place', 'the inferno of the living where we live every day.' How, he asks, can we free ourselves from this, the antithesis of utopia? To this question, Polo answers as follows:

> There are two ways to escape... The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (Op. Cit.: 164.)

It can indeed often seem that present-day museums exist in a world that is far from utopian, that they are caught up in an inferno of funding cuts, political demands and narrowly instrumental policy-making; and certainly it is true that, like the Khan, those involved in museum governance need to have a good dose of *realpolitik*. The pressure to relent and become a part of this inferno, the rush to instrumentalise everything, to pin everything down with principles and procedures and mission statements and objectives and five year plans can be almost overwhelming. But there is, Polo reminds us, another possibility, one that we risk overlooking entirely once we have become part of this particular inferno.

This possibility is one that seeks to resist the inferno not by fighting against it so much as by refusing to argue on the terms that it demands. If we are right in what we are suggesting, and if there is a genuine epistemological problem when it comes to knowing many of those 'no places' and 'happy places' that constitute already existing museum utopias, and if the mattering of museums is largely invisible and exceptions, in many cases, *are* the rule, then what is demanded is a different kind of vigilance. It is a vigilance born out of the astonishing idea that museums may manage to nourish, excite, provoke, compel and enrich those who make use of them in ways that are so diverse and hidden that they will never enter into such instrumentalised accounting. It is a vigilance that can take heart from the intelligence brought by researcher-storytellers such as Marco Polo, intelligence that may testify to or hint at the existence of countless invisible utopias, and then has the courage to act in such a way that these utopias, maddeningly unmeasurable and unmappable as they may be, might be given space.

This, then, is the challenge; but what this might actually mean for museum policy and practice—how it might be possible to protect and nurture these utopian spaces when they may necessarily always remain invisible—is a question that extends beyond the scope of this present paper.

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Do It Yourself (DIY) Museums.
Study on Small Museums in Estonia and the People Behind Them

Liisi Taimre

Abstract

This paper discusses alternative ways of museum-making. In the focus of this paper are small independent museums of Estonia run by self-learned museum workers. The first part of the paper tries to understand the reasons why there are so many museums with grassroots initiative in Estonia and what is the motivation of the people running them. The following subsection concentrates on the biggest strength of small museums – good contacts with the topic of the museums, the visitors and the community. In the conclusion it is discussed if amateur museums conflict with 'professional' museums in some ways. The paper is based on nineteen interviews with people from small museums in Harju County, Estonia.

Keywords: personal utopias, grassroots initiatives, community, non-professionals

During the last decades, museums have been working hard to meet the needs of contemporary society. Since Peter Vergo's proposal to re-examine the role of museums in society in 1989 (Vergo, 1989: 3), many new ideas and practices have been developed under the concept of New Museology. Museum professionals struggle hard to bring new stakeholders to the museum and museologists concentrate on questions of how to make museums less elitist, more audience centered and more inclusive institutions (e.g. Simon, 2010, Sandell, 2012). While many of the existing museums are making efforts to include a wider audience with a more active role, the ideas of New Museology have also been materialised by the emerging new types of museums – e.g. ecomuseums, neighbourhood museums and community museums (Heijnen, 2010: 14).

To complete the picture of the contemporary museum world, there is one more tendency that must be mentioned – the large number of small independent museums run by amateurs. Although in some countries they might even outnumber the professional museums, their existence is often forgotten by museum professionals. This paper seeks to help filling the gap. The focus of this article is small independent museums in Estonia; however the broader aim is to discuss alternative ways of museum-making.

Many authors have concentrated on the questions of broadening the idea of what a museum and its functions could be. In the same article where James Clifford proposed that museums could function as 'contact zones' he also argued for 'an expansion of the range of things that can happen in museums and museum-like settings' (Clifford, 1999: 452). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett compares museums with utopias and sees them both as an art practice,

thus 'the museum is not simply a place for representing utopia, but rather a site for practicing it as a way of imagining' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004: 3). The examples given above are just a few from a wide range of writings that describe museums as something more than just an institution and its objectives wider than 'collecting, preserving and exhibiting'. The only author who has written extensively about amateur museums and introduced alternative ways of museum-making is German museologist Angela Jannelli. She approaches amateur museums with Levi Strauss' concept of 'the savage mind' and sees amateur museums as forms of cultural manifestation (Jannelli, 2012).[i]

This article tries to understand the motives of people behind amateur museums, their peculiar ways of museum-making and finally asks in which areas these museums might conflict with professional museums. This paper is based on nineteen interviews carried out in 2011-2012 with people from small museums in Harju county.[ii] The article can be considered as a reflection of different perspectives gained from fieldtrips to small museums and interviews carried out.

Definition

Museums included in the research had to meet three criteria. Firstly, they had to define themselves as museums. As one of the aims of this paper is to broaden the boundaries of understanding what a museum is, any traditional definition of a museum could not be used. The only solution was to let the institutions decide whether they define themselves as a museum or not. Secondly, there are no more than three people involved – the less people involved the more clearly points of view of single persons are drawn out. Thirdly, the museum should not be run as a business project. On the contrary, some of the informants said they had to pay extra to keep a museum running.[iii]

> 'On every payday we have to pay a sum to keep the museum running. Everyone has it´s expenses – one is paying for the insurance, another for the electricity, a third for other direct costs.' (Informant 1. FM – fieldwork materials 2011)

> 'If my husband wouldn´t work in Finland I couldn´t afford working in a museum.' (Informant 2. FM – fieldwork materials 2011)

Historical Background

In Estonia there are a total of 245 museums (Estonian Ministry of Culture, 2011). If we exclude central museums and larger municipal museums there are over 200 of them still remaining. It is a remarkable number in comparison to the population of Estonia which is 1.3 million. There are historical reasons behind that kind of 'museummania'. Many of today's small museums were founded in the 1980s. It was a time when the Soviet Union began to collapse and for the first time in 50 years people had the possibility to speak publicly about their past and heritage and interpret it freely. All over the country, different kinds of village societies, heritage organisations and museums were formed.

The second wave of small museums and other local institutions began to emerge in 2000. It can be seen as a sign of the developing citizen society. Another reason is the possibility to apply for different European Union structural funds targeted for rural areas. It has given new life to many old museum buildings and has created the opportunity to get something practical done – e.g. a new roof or insulation.

The legal situation for private museums is favourable in Estonia. There are no limitations if one wants to found a museum. One simply has to inform the Ministry of Culture about the name, topic and location of the museum and once a year provide statistical data. All other paragraphs of the law – e.g. collection management regulations – are optional for private museums (Estonian Museum Law, 1996).

Museum as Self-Realisation

Although the attitude towards small and private museums is generally positive in Estonia and there are possibilities to apply for partial external funding, the question still remains why so many people are ready to invest their spare time and money into their (personal) museums. During the interviews, many interviewees were not able to give concrete reasons for what motivated them to found a museum.

The most common answers were related to people's interest in history – 'I have always loved history and old stuff'; 'I have been in "that" for my whole life' or 'My school was situated in an old manor house, that's where it all began' (Informants 3, 2, 4. FM 2011, 2012). Another reason brought out by the informants was a wish to contribute to local village life. People in charge of museums in smaller places are usually active in other aspects of community life as well. One of the village activists explains: 'At first there were common

activities with people from my home village and a museum was a natural development' (Informant 5. FM 2012). To have a museum is also a matter of pride. A man in his thirties says that he likes that he can go to the pub and prides himself on having a museum. At the same time he admits that he is doing it mainly for fun. 'What is a museum nowadays? There is a show and a little bit of science behind it. According to that we are not a museum at all. We are doing what we like and what is fun for us.' (Informant 6. FM 2011)

The founding of a museum can be connected to a sense of mission – especially in the case of thematic museums, e.g. a son of a smith has founded a museum dedicated to all Estonian smiths – he believes that smiths are the backbone of Estonia (Informant 7. FM 2012). Also, the founder of *Museum of Estonian Wars of Independence* sees the museum as a duty that has been put on him:

> 'It was on 20th October in 1988, about 5:00 am. Was it God himself or some other unknown powers... but they put a duty on me to found a museum here. I told my wife - let´s go and find the place. [summer cottage of the brother of the former President of Estonia – author] I thought if it is meant to be like that then let it be. I have put all my energy in it.' (Informant 8. *Museum of Estonian Wars of Independence* 2012)

A young Estonian businessman`s case is an interesting one. In 2005 he expressed his interest towards heritage by financing archaeological excavations at a hill-fort near his summer cottage. Currently, he is studying archaeology at the university, he has put up some information panels at the hill-fort about the results of the excavations and since autumn 2011 he is working as a head (and at the same time the only employee) in a local museum. In the future he hopes to expand the museum over the whole area. To the hill-fort he wants to build a visitors centre that resembles the ceramic pot found during the excavations. His motivation for doing all this is that he is concerned that science that derives from universities does not reach the 'common people' – some very specific archaeology articles may only interest four or five colleagues. With his museum he wants to promote the archaeological heritage of the area more widely (Informant 9. FM 2012).
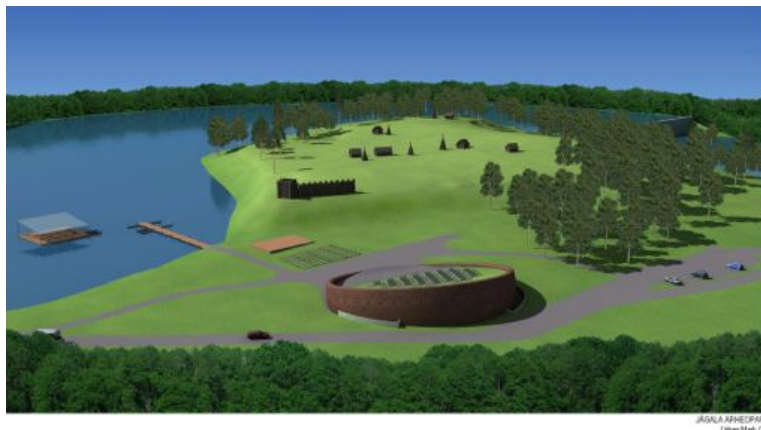
Figure 1. Vision of a future archeopark at Jägala hill-fort. Drawing: Urban Mark OÜ

Although none of the interviewees expressed it directly, all the reasons named above can be interpreted as ways of self-realisation. Museum-making as self-realisation is an interesting addition to the long list of museum functions.

Personal Contacts

Although all DIY museums and their methods of museum-making are different, the common characteristic is the 'personal contact'. In the context of this article the notion 'personal contact' can have three meanings – 1) personal contact with the theme of the museum; 2) the personal approach to the visitors and 3) good contact with the local community. Taken together, all three are abilities that every museum that is working towards wider participation and inclusion would be content with.

Personal relation to the topic of the museum can lead to the situation where the borders between the public space and the private space are quite fuzzy, e.g. *Museum of Estonian War of Independence* is dedicated to the war history of Estonia, but, in the permanent exhibition one can also find two canisters that were used by the grandfather of the museum owner for smuggling vodka to Finland during the Dry Law in the 1930s. The exhibition has expanded all over the owner's courtyard. On the bridge that leads to the museum (and home of the museum owners family) two massive towers have been erected. According to the owner these are symbols of ancient Estonian forts. During training, the Estonian Defence League is housed there (Informant 8. FM 2011). It is a good example of how a visit to a museum can also be a visit to the museum owners personal worldview.

Figure 2. Part of the museum owners family history of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Estonian Wars Of Independence. Photo: Liisi Taimre 2011

Figure 3. Elements of the museum have expanded into the landscape. 'Defence-towers' built by the owner of the Museum of Estonian Wars of Independence. Photo: Liisi Taimre 2011

The presentation of one's personal worldview is a good starting point for making contact with a visitor. In DIY museums the head of the museum, curator, collection manager, guide and warden is often the same person. As real enthusiasts, they love explaining how their

exhibitions are compiled, how their museum functions and telling additional stories about the exhibition. It dissuades the visitor from just walking through the exhibition and forces him/her to relate to the exhibition at least in some way. People in DIY museums fully appreciate the importance of communicating with visitors. 'You have to talk to people, especially to foreigners! When he/she goes to a museum somewhere else, he/she just buys the ticket and that's it. We deal with every person as much as we can.' (Informant 2. FM 2011)

They are fully aware that what they are saying is only their opinion and they are not claiming it as an absolute truth. 'You just talk how you think and see the things. It may not be the opinion of all Estonians. But you just talk how in your family it has been spoken about.' (Informant 2. FM 2011). One person even admitted that according to old storytelling traditions some things were made up – it helped visitors to remember the information better (Informant 5. FM 2012).

As museum workers in smaller places are well known persons in the community, the collection work is often skilfully used to strengthen the ties between the museum and the community. During the housing and population census in 2012 many museum workers took a second job as an enumerator. Quite often the official enumeration process ended up with the donation of some objects to the museum (Informant 4. FM 2012). While large museums can not afford to accept all items they are offered, small museums often can not afford to reject any item. 'One has to be clever. If you accept his broken Wellington boots today then tomorrow he might bring something valuable.' (Informant 3. FM 2011) Although such attitudes could overwhelm museum storage rooms, it definitely helps to maintain good contact with the community.

Possible Points of Conflict

Despite DIY museums not being registered in any institutional form, it is not free from the museum as an institution. Only by publicly defining themselves as a museum are they becoming part of the 'symbolic capital associated with the museum' (Buntix, Karp, 2006: 207). Thus, to some extent DIY museums may conflict with 'professional' museums.

The biggest problems of DIY museums are connected with their sustainability – museums are usually seen as permanent institutions where heritage is kept in trust. Unfortunately, it is sometimes hard to predict how long the life-span of a small independent museum will be. A very important part of exhibitions in DIY museums are the stories told by

museum workers, but the stories are not documented anywhere. Similarly, the information about the collections indicates that the only person who has the whole information about the objects is the founder of the museum. Furthermore, DIY museums often do not have the time or the money, or lack motivation to set up and maintain a museum database.

The best scenario would be that the museum would be inherited by the next generation and new people will take over, making it alive with their stories. It would be a very good start for a community museum with a grassroots initiative. The more probable scenario is that the museum dies together with the person or persons running it. As shown above, in DIY museums often the person running the museum is as important as the permanent exhibition or the collections. If there is no one who could bind the environment and objects in it into one fascinating story then there is no museum.

People are used to seeing museums as permanent institutions where their heritage is kept safe. In the previous subsection we saw how a museum accepted broken Wellington boots as a positive example of putting the member of community and his/her understanding of valuable heritage first. However, is it right for a museum to accept an item without being certain if it can be preserved for future generations? Or, rather, is it right and natural in some cases to allow museums to be mortal and thus cease to exist?

Conclusion

During the last decades, there has been a lot of talk about the democratisation of the museum world. Many museums and museologists have put a lot of effort in to including wider audiences in the museum. Attention has been put into broadening the museum world itself e.g. new types of museums (ecomuseums, community museums) have come into existence and new types of activities are taking place in museums.

This paper focused on small independent museums that have, so far, not received much attention. This paper considered amateur museums which defined themselves as museums, whose staff consisted of a maximum of three people and were not commercial business projects. In the context of this paper they were termed as 'DIY museums'.

The interviews carried out with museum amateurs from small museums in Harju county (Estonia) revealed that a key motivation for them was self-realisation. The interviewees admitted that they were doing it mainly for fun, but, also many felt a kind of obligation – to commemorate or promote the topic that is for some reason important to them.

Such a personal attitude to the theme of their museums leads to personal contact with the visitor and the local community, which can be seen as the biggest strength of DIY museums. The main area where DIY museums are most likely to conflict with the 'professional' museum world is sustainability – museums are generally seen to be permanent institutions but occasionally a DIY museum dies with the person who founded it.

What is the future of DIY museums? Through the desire for self-realisation (probably without realising) – people in DIY museums are actually following modern tendencies of democratisation in the museum world. If, in many museums, the audience is taken and accepted as an equal partner to museum professionals, then, perhaps one day the museums which are run by non-professionals will also be viewed and accepted as equal colleagues.

Notes

i. The author of this paper acquired the book in the final phase of writing the article, hence the reason why the ideas of Angela Jannelli have not been reflected in the main body of the article.

ii. As some of the interviewees asked for privacy, in most cases references to concrete persons and museums have been avoided. All the informants were marked by numbers and the year interview was carried out has been noted.

iii. The difference between private museums and small municipal museums has not been made in this paper.

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Re-making utopia in the museum: artists as curators

Miranda Stearn

Abstract

Artists have long exposed and explored the inner workings and perceived shortcomings of actual museums through the creation of their own museum utopias. These projects, appropriating and modifying the language of the museum to create museum-like spaces outside the museum, have the potential to question how museums are and posit new models for how they could be, particularly in the case of artists working in the tradition of institutional critique.

This paper uses the example of Hans Haacke's Mixed Messages, 2001, to look at what happens when these utopian projects are invited back into the space of a 'real' museum as commissioned artist interventions, re-making the ideal museum within the institution.

Keywords: Contemporary, Artist, Intervention, Institutional critique

Re-making utopia in the museum: artists as curators

> As I see it, artists doing institutional critiques of museums tend to fall into two different camps. There are those who see the museum as an irredeemable reservoir of class ideology – the very notion of the museum is corrupt to them. Then there are those who are critical of the museum not because they want to blow it up but because they want to make it a more interesting and effective cultural institution (Dion cited in Corrin, Kwon and Bryson 1997: 16).[i]

Artists have long exposed and explored the inner workings and perceived shortcomings of actual museums through the creation of their own museum utopias in contemporary art spaces or commercial galleries. These projects, appropriating and modifying the language of the museum to create museum-like spaces outside the museum have the potential to question how museums are and posit new models for how they could be, particularly in the case of artists working in the tradition of institutional critique.

This paper looks at what happens when these 'utopian' projects, creating museums less flawed than any that exist in the real world, are invited back into the space of a 'real' museum as commissioned artist interventions, re-making the ideal museum within the institution.

These questions will be explored through the prism of Hans Haacke's museum-related projects, from his controversial interventions of the early 1970s to his invitation to create *Mixed Messages* as part of *Give + Take*, the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2001 collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery. Haacke is by no means the only artist whose relationship with museums provides an opportunity to explore these themes, but for the sake of achieving a depth of analysis within a limited word count, this paper will focus on this one artist. As exhibitions such as *Museum as Muse* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999) and more recently *The Museum Show* (Arnolfini, Bristol, 2011-12) demonstrate, museums have provided such rich material for contemporary artists over recent decades that museum-inspired projects have become almost a genre of their own.

Context: Artists and institutions

Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion and Fred Wilson among others have all straddled the divide between interrogating the museum and manipulating its forms from the outside, and coming 'inside' to respond to museum invitations. Wilson, for example, provides a parallel if more recent case study, creating installations raising challenging questions in relation to contexts of display for some years before being invited into the museum. Projects such as *Rooms with a View: the Struggle between Culture, Content and Context of Art* (Longwood Arts Project, New York, 1987), *The Other Museum* (White Columns, New York, 1990), *Primitivism High and Low* (Metro Pictures, New York, 1991) and *Panta Rei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art* (1992), recreated the language and techniques of the museum, creating a series of 'pseudomuseums' (González 2008: 73, 82) to lay bare its workings and challenge its implied claims to neutrality or objective truth. With his much discussed *Mining the Museum* (Maryland Historical Society 1992), Wilson brought his practice into the museum, initiating the first in a line of projects in which museum collections themselves would become the raw materials through which he carried out his investigations at the invitation of curators.

Inviting practitioners of institutional critique such as Wilson and Haacke into the museum as curators is both logical and problematic. Logical because, through demonstrating a strong engagement with museum collections, these contemporary artists suggest the relevance of these collections in the here and now, helping work against the image of museums as 'family sepulchers of works of art' (Adorno 1955: 175). For the artists too, responding to museum invitations offers opportunities to push and extend lines of enquiry begun outside the museum through the unprecedented access and profile offered by taking on

the role of an official guest curator. Nevertheless, these projects are also problematic because the notion of invited critique can seem inherently contradictory, asking the artist who takes on the role of curator to come 'inside' the institution and thus jeopardise the external position which might previously have been seen as a prerequisite for the utopian imagination.

Looked at more positively, the increased frequency with which critique has been brought into the museum reflects the convergence of challenging artist practice with revisionist, self-reflective trends emerging within museums, and an awareness that by inviting artists to take on the role of curator, they can be enlisted as enablers, facilitators or partners in this process, taking museums one step nearer to utopia.

An unwelcome guest: Haacke's early museum projects

Han Haacke's turbulent and drawn-out transition from external critic to internal collaborator can serve as a reminder that relations between museums and the artists who practise critique have not always been so amicable. During the 1970s, two of Haacke's projects proved so unwelcome to the museums designated to host them that they were directly censored, with both the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1971) and the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne (1974) banning his work.

Haacke was intended to play a lead role in an exhibition to be held at the Guggenheim. Museum Director Thomas M. Messer intervened, insisting that Haacke omit three of his proposed works, including two pieces dealing with New York real estate corruption and one visitors' poll which included questions relating to visitors' political opinions. Haacke offered to replace the names of the real estate owners with fictitious ones but refused to withdraw the works, prompting Messer to cancel the whole show.[ii] In 1974, Haacke was intended to exhibit as part of *PROJEKT '74. Kunst bleibt Kunst* to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. His proposed project *Manet-PROJEKT '74*, charting the provenance of Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880), was excluded from the exhibition because of the politically embarrassing biographical details it included linking the current chairman of the museum's friends' committee to Nazi economic policy. The piece was instead shown in the private gallery of dealer Paul Maenz, while fellow artist Daniel Buren (b. 1938) posted small copies of Haacke's panels to his own works within the exhibition.

In the aftermath of these incidents, it is perhaps unsurprising that for the next two decades Haacke exhibited his projects directly concerned with museums and their processes, such as *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* (1974), *Manet-PROJEKT '74* (1974), *On Social Grease* (1975), and *MetroMobilitan* (1985), in private commercial galleries

or contemporary art settings.[iii] What is perhaps more surprising is that he returned to work within the museum at all, and conversely, that curators and directors dared to invite him to do so.

Invited back in: Haacke's curatorial projects

Viewing Matters: Upstairs (1996), at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, saw Haacke taking on the role of curator in just these circumstances. The most controversial aspect of Haacke's intervention was the decision to relocate the collection storage racks from the museum basement in the main gallery space, complete with collection works hung 'according to how best to save space, irrespective of medium, period, monetary value and historic and aesthetic significance' (Haacke cited in Grasskamp, Nesbit and Bird 2004: 15), a gesture designed to disrupt and lay bare the formation of the hierarchies of display in the museum:

> I wanted to demonstrate that every presentation of works from the collection is inevitably a highly selective choice, driven by an ideologically inflected agenda – as was mine. It is often assumed that what we get to see on the walls of museums is a disinterested display of the best works, and represents a reliable account of history. This, of course, is never the case. The canon is an agreement by people with cultural power at a certain time. It has no universal validity (ibid.: 15).

In Haacke's hands, exhibiting not simply works from the museum store but the conditions of storage became a challenging intervention highlighting the processes by which curators make clear to visitors what is important, and by extension the fact that curators wield this power in the first place. Interestingly, Haacke notes that 'some curators and directors in the Netherlands were outraged', adding by way of explanation, 'I believe they thought I didn't treat the works with proper respect' (ibid.: 15). The irony of this response, given that Haacke was treating works exactly as the curators treated them, simply in a public rather than private area, underlines the power of his gesture. This 'outrage' however was nowhere near the scale of the controversies surrounding Haacke's censored projects of the 1970s and the project went ahead in line with Haacke's original intentions (ibid.: 15).

In addition to displaying the conditions of storage by relocating the racks, Haacke selected groups of works from the collection on five different themes: Artists, Reception, Work/Power, Alone/Together/Against Each Other, and Seeing. The items selected included paintings, sculpture, photography and other types of objects, and within each theme works from very different eras were juxtaposed, for example, Frans Florin's *Death of Lucretia* (1555-65) was hung between two contemporary photographs: Inez van Lamsweerde's *Thank*

you Thighmaster: Pam (1993) and Craigie Horsfield's *E. Horsfield. Well Street, east London, October 1983, 1995* (1995).

Haacke's selection and arrangement, while exploring loose themes, confounded expectations of museum display by disregarding traditional organising devices such as national schools or chronology, and by bringing together acknowledged 'masterpieces' (such as Degas' *Little Dancer aged Fourteen*, 1880-81) with 'less important' stored works. Haacke also departed from museum convention by refraining from supplying any written explanations for his selections. Instead, he insisted that viewers look at the 'matters' on display and deduce their own meanings from the unexpected juxtapositions, explaining:

> Had I done so [provided explanations], I would have undermined the technique of causing creative fiction that has been attributed to the Comte de Lautréamont: juxtaposing normally unrelated objects, such as an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table (ibid.: 16).

Instead of being presented with an officially endorsed canon, ready-packaged for passive consumption, Haacke challenged his viewers to navigate his selection for themselves and draw their own conclusions, and in so doing hoped to make them more aware that no museum display represents a pre-endowed objective truth and all might be considered as arbitrary and contingent upon personal or institutional decisions as his own, and might require just as much active critical scrutiny – that, in the word of his title, *Viewing Matters*.[iv]

In 2001 *Mixed Messages*, Haacke's contribution to *Give + Take* (a partnership initiative between the Victoria and Albert Museum and The Serpentine Gallery) brought his practice to London. Haacke's installation juxtaposed items from the museum's collections, relocating them into the 'white cube' context of the Serpentine and defying conventions of display by dispensing with traditional categories, labelling and even symmetry and alignment in the hang. Each grouping of objects within a room seemed linked by an underlying theme, but this was implicit rather than explicit and the onus was put upon the visitor to draw out these connections and their implied meanings. In the north gallery, for example, a Buddhist statue, a medieval crucifix, a seventeenth-century Torah mantle and two Muslim prayer rugs (all usually under the auspices of different curatorial departments within the V&A) were exhibited on the four walls of the room with a cast of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* in the centre. The west gallery incorporated a large painting of the 1851 Great Exhibition juxtaposed with aquatints of street life in Victorian Calcutta, nineteenth-century South Indian paintings of westerners on tiger hunts, a Notting Hill carnival headdress from 2000, an album of 'South African Racial Types', and a nineteenth century doll with interchangeable head and limbs

which could thus be assembled as a black boy or white girl, along with various other images and objects evocative of racial attitudes and colonialism.

Speaking of the major preoccupations shaping his engagement with the V&A, Haacke emphasises the significance of drawing out this imperial context:

> The western world and its institutions, as we know, has a problematic history relative to the rest of the world. Colonialist if not outright racist attitudes toward non-Western people appear in the V&A's collections of paintings, prints and watercolours, in caricatures, ethnographic charts, in dolls, games and toys of all sorts, some even produced for the Western market by non-Western makers. […] But then there is also the positive image of the black Magus in a Swabian Adoration of the Magi of around 1500, and early-eighteenth-century tender white (!) marble head of a black boy from the Netherlands […] The obnoxious examples in the V&A's collection offer an important historical perspective. They function as pieces of evidence. Aside from many other things, the V&A is a museum of the British Empire. (Haacke cited in Kaplan 2002: 85).

As Haacke makes clear, the imperial legacy is only one aspect of the V&A, but, he considers it important that this underlying facet of the museum's identity become an active part of how visitors understand and respond to the museum, alongside aesthetic enjoyment of the objects presented, commenting:

> What museums should perhaps do is make visitors aware that this is not the only way of seeing things. That the museum – the installation, the arrangement, the collection – has a history, and that it also has an ideological baggage (Haacke cited in Glover 2001: 11).

Haacke's *Mixed Messages* can be seen as a strategy for achieving this aim, and critical response suggests he was largely successful, with one critic describing the project as 'the unearthing and reshuffling of historical and artistic objects from a specific museum collection in order to bring out sublimated attitudes towards race, class and political power' (Heartney 2001: 51-53).

The reception of *Mixed Messages* as an essentially post-colonial intervention comes through clearly in the press response, with the installation variously described as 'a mad conversation piece, in which stories about empire, colonialism, race, sex, religion, class and cultural division collide with the things which represent them,' (Searle 2001: 12-13) and

> a fierce conceptual assault on the origins of the V&A, on the cultural climate at the time of its founding, and, by extension, on Britain today. Haacke achieves all this with creative juxtapositions that leave you, the spectator, to make the connections […] Haacke's display is given over entirely to the taking of clever pokes at the sins of the British: at our racism, colonialism, sexism, capitalism (Januszczak 2001: 4-5).

Nevertheless, most commentators shared the view that the post-colonial critique, while present, was considerably less biting than might have been anticipated given Haacke's previous projects, and that the laying-bare of imperial resonances went hand in hand with an enthusiastic, appreciative response to the visual riches of the V&A's collection which the visitor could not fail to pick up on and participate in – presumably a relief to the V&A Trustees who, apparently, had awaited the exhibition and press response with some anxiety.[v] Indeed several commentators used the image of Haacke, the fierce critic, having unexpectedly succumbed to the almost seductive charms of the collection, with Richard Dorment describing the outcome as 'more of a pussycat's purr than a tiger's growl' which 'all but omits the customary outrage and moral superiority',[vi] and John McEwen describing how Haacke

> flaunts his subversive credentials by selecting a few objects showing the empire in a disagreeable light and the V&A as a bastion of imperial values, but on the whole he succumbs to the museum's charms; as will the audience for his instructive, amusing and – in the form of a fourteenth-century Italian crucifix – moving selection (McEwan 2001: 11).

Haacke himself attributes this apparent 'mellowing' to a shift in focus away from looking only at 'particular conditions in this institution and at this particular moment,' (Haacke cited in Kaplan 2002: 90) instead taking the opportunity of working with the V&A to enact a broader meditation on 'the institutions of art history and museums as such, and of the ideological implications of "museuming," of how artifacts are presented, and how that affects our understanding of society, then and now' (ibid.: 90).[vii]

Artist-as-curator projects, as a sub-category of artist interventions, can participate in transforming the museum from authoritative purveyor of grand narratives, undermining the false objectivity of impersonal museum interpretation by turning to the opposite extreme of privileging a unique personal response, while also providing a succinct and compelling way of expressing the subjectivity of historical interpretation without resorting to extensive, sometimes abstruse text, or a laborious summary of all possible explanations. In this context, Hans Haacke's juxtapositions within *Mixed Messages* prompt chains of thought about the V&A, its objects and the impact of context on meaning that would take many lines of text to express, and even then not fully.

Critique versus collaboration

This modified role for the artist however, working within rather than outside the museum or gallery, presents challenges in the context of the practice of institutional critique, as several

commentators have been quick to note. Hal Foster comments on instances in which such invited interventions 'often seem a museum event in which the institution imports critique, whether as a show of tolerance or for the purpose of inoculation (against a critique undertaken by the institution, within the institution)' (Foster 1996: 191). Similarly, Miwon Kwon comments that, through the sometimes repetitive formula of commissioned critique, artists 'can easily become extensions of the museum's own self-promotional apparatus' (Kwon 1997: 102), while Isabelle Graw describes a process of commodification whereby '[s]ubversion in the service of one's own convictions finds easy transition into subversion for hire; "criticism turns into spectacle"' (Graw 1990: 137).

This delegation of critique to artists external to the institution can be seen as an avoidance of curatorial responsibility. Sue Latimer, writing on artist interventions in *Museums Journal* in 2001, asked, 'Why don't museum curators do it themselves rather than turn to contemporary artists?' (Latimer 2001: 29). Among possible answers, she suggests the notion that it might be easier for a curator to convince colleagues to allow an artist to take a new approach than to take that new approach internally, thus 'transferring the risk element' – to this one might add that the risk element is not only transferred but contained, isolated to a one-off project rather than threatening to become part of ongoing practice.

There are alternative, more hopeful readings. Commentators such as Frazer Ward and Jennifer Gonzalez challenge the notion that invited institutional critique always ends up serving the institution under scrutiny by emphasising the role of the artist in creating a more questioning visiting public who will continue enacting the project of critique rather than passively accepting museum narratives (Ward 1995: 84). This analysis, however, still takes as a starting point the assumption that artists commissioned by the museum to carry out interventions must somehow create the space for genuine critique in spite of their hosts / commissioners, rather than with their co-operation.

Hans Haacke is among the artists challenging this implication that when an artist and museum attempt to collaborate, one side must necessarily out-manoeuvre the other:

> There are curators and administrators today who participated in the cultural revolution of the 60s and read the same books as we did [...] to the more adventurous among them it is not as problematic as it once was to extend an invitation to me. In turn, I do not consider myself automatically as being co-opted when that happens. (Haacke cited in Bickers 2001: 3)

Finally, Isabelle Graw offers a slightly different take on the notion of the artist as 'institutional ventriloquist', suggesting that curators turn to artists to deliver critical

interventions not because they are unwilling or unable to take responsibility for doing so themselves, but because as 'insiders' they lack the position of authority to do so, creating 'an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they themselves disapprove' (Graw 1990: 137).

And the collection?

Amongst the complex theorizing and occasional hand-wringing that accompanies questions surrounding the integrity or otherwise of artists invited to intervene in collections as guest curators, it might be easy to overlook the question of the visitor's experience of the collection works contained in these selections. Clearly, Haacke's projects call for a more active, critical mode of viewing as there is no straightforward message to be passively consumed – as the exhibition title suggests, the messages are indeed undeniably mixed. This active mode of viewing, originating in the unusual juxtapositions and lack of written interpretation, impacts upon viewers' experience of the selected objects but also potentially stays with them in their future museum interactions, all of which can be taken as very positive. However, as artists such as Haacke gain increasing prominence, is it really the collection objects that the viewers come to experience, or is it the named artist-curator, who eclipses the museum objects which become merely raw materials, not works of art, relegated to mere components in a larger vision, in which it is within the syntax rather than the individual words that the meaning, and therefore the interest, is to be found?

Ultimately, artists' museum utopias tend to be more about, as Haacke puts it, 'museums as such' rather than the particular objects within them, and it is this that ensures that they will always remain problematic as solutions in real museums which still understand their core business as enabling encounters between people and objects, rather than institutions.

With artist intervention projects establishing themselves within the programming of so many museums, thinking critically about how they operate and what their impact might be upon artists, audiences, institutions and their collections feels all the more important. This paper has used Haacke's transition from critic to collaborator to explore the potential, but also the challenges, of this practice. The popularity of recent projects such as *Banksy versus Bristol Museum* (2009) and Grayson Perry's *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum (2011) demonstrates the power of artists' curatorial projects to capture the public imagination and get people into the museum. The question of whether what they

encounter when they get there is any nearer a museum 'utopia' than a display curated 'inhouse' by museum staff plays into much wider debates about what museums are, could or should be.

Acknowledgements

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[i] Mark Dion, interviewed by Miwon Kwon (Corrin, Kwon and Bryson, 1997: 16).

[ii] Walter Grasskamp describes the implications for all concerned as follows: 'This blatant censorship and the violation of both the freedom of art and the right to express political opinions were so flagrant that protest was unanimous across all artistic camps, with numerous internationally known artists joining a boycott of the museum. No cultural, educational and political institution in a democratic country has ever been so rightly pilloried as the Guggenheim and its Director after the cancellation of the show. It is difficult to exaggerate the financial and personal damage incurred as a result of this censorship, in the lives of both curator and artist. Fry worked as a co-curator on documenta 6 and documenta 8 in 1977 and 1987, but was never again employed by a US museum, and Haacke's work was not bought or shown in US museums for twelve years.' (Grasskamp, Nesbit and Bird, 2004: 47)

[iii] First installation venues for these projects were: *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* - 'Live!', Stefanotty Gallery, New York, 1974; *Manet-PROJEKT '74* - Galerie Paul Maenz, Cologne, 1974; *On Social Grease* – John Weber Gallery, New York, 1975; *Oelgemaelde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* – documenta 7, Kassel, 1982; and *MetroMobilitan* - John Weber Gallery, New York, 1985.

[iv] Here institutional critique finds productive synergy with constructivist learning theory, which, through the work of George Hein, has proved influential in a museum sector where educationalists (as well as on occasion curators and exhibition designers) think in terms of meaning making as the process which goes on when people learn in the context of the museum. Hein summarises constructivist learning theory as follows: 'What is meant by constructivism? The term refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves – each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning – as he or she learns. Constructing meaning is learning: there is no other kind. The dramatic consequences of this are twofold: 1) we have to focus on the learner in thinking about learning (not on the subject/lesson to be taught); 2) there is no knowledge independent of the meaning

attributed to experience (constructed) by the learner, or community of learners' (Hein cited in Durbin 1991: 30).

[v] 'I (as one not in the inner councils of the museum) formed the impression that there was considerable apprehension on high (at Trustee level) about what Hans Haacke would do to us; its was thought that the V&A was about to score an "own goal", yet again.' Anthony Burton reflecting on *Give & Take*, in response to questions posed by Gavin Colthart, who was writing a dissertation on Haacke. Burton goes on to describe how the V&A press officer had been instructed to prepare a defence against possible disaster, but in the end no 'defence-spinning' was necessary. Unpublished email dated 09/01/2002, V&A file RF 2000/220, pt 3.

[vi] Richard Dorment, 'Museums of moving images', *The Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 31 January 2001, p.27.

[vii] Hans Haacke, quoted in Kaplan, 2002: 90. Haacke reflects further on this theme in another interview, this time with Patricia Bickers: 'Some people, who have looked at earlier works of mine, are wondering whether I have mellowed. Maybe so. But perhaps they have a somewhat one-dimensional view of me. In the show at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and also in this work here at the Serpentine, I am not primarily interested in looking at today's power structures in and behind the institutions (not that this is no longer of interest to me). Instead I am focusing on the artifacts in the collection, their presentation, the institution of the museum and the institution of art history. The production of meaning intrigues me as much as looking at who funds the institution and what they get in return. To a degree, of course, they are linked.' Hans Haacke, interviewed by Patricia Bickers (Bickers, 2001: 3).

The best as the enemy of the good: utopian approaches
to professional practice in UK museums
Helen Wilkinson

Abstract

In the decades after World War Two, professional practice in UK museums was characterised by dissatisfaction with the status quo, accompanied by attempts to bring rigour and order to bear where before there was said to have been slovenliness and idiosyncrasy. Some of these initiatives were focused on the work of individual museums, others across the broader sector. Articulations of curatorial professional identity often relied on condemnations of the inadequacies of previous approaches and the adoption or attempted adoption of idealistic approaches to practice.

In some cases, these approaches were unrealistically onerous, advocating unworkably complex methods and letting perfectionism triumph over pragmatism. They also tended to privilege abstract ideals over the preferences and needs of visitors. This paper explores the utopian impulse as an aspect of professional practice in museums and considers whether those pursuing such approaches in the second half of the twentieth-century made 'the best the enemy of the good'.

Key words

Professionalism, Curatorship, Standards.

The best as the enemy of the good: utopian approaches to professional practice in UK museums

I first came across the phrase 'the best as the enemy of the good' while working on documentation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the late 1990s. It was a favourite admonition of my then boss, Alan Seal, who was head of the museum's documentation and collections management department. He used it to caution against perfectionism and foster pragmatism: the best is the enemy of the good when a search for the perfect utopian solution stops practitioners finding workable solutions to messy problems in the real world.

This paper explores the impulse towards perfectionism as an aspect of museum professionalism, and suggests that an over-emphasis on 'doing things properly', on standards and correct procedures, has perhaps sometimes stood in the way of a full realisation of the potential of museums to inspire and delight their audiences. It focuses on the decades following World War Two in the UK, and draws on archive research using documents produced by museums including Annual Reports, reports to funders and governing bodies, public guidebooks and ephemera such as marketing leaflets, now in the collections of the

University of Leicester Library. It examines the way that museums present and construct their own practice in these documents.

The documents do not, in the main, have a named author, but use a collective, corporate voice, although in practice they would probably have been written by the museum's director, since very few museums had access to marketing or public affairs staff before the 1980s. In using these archive sources, it is important to recognise that they are not neutral texts and may purposely overstate the extent both of past failings and present success. These texts do not necessarily represent the author's candid assessment of past and present practice, but rather a version of that assessment deployed for a particular, if unstated, purpose. The accounts may aim to impress, to argue for additional resources or to defend against negative perceptions of the museum service. All are prone to put a positive gloss on the messy reality of day to day professional practice. Nevertheless, the trope of improved – or even perfected – professional practice is significant for what it tells us about the nature of museum professionalism and professionalisation in this period. The next section considers several examples.

Better collecting

Collecting practice was an early focus for attempts to bring more rigorous approaches to bear on museum work in the post-war decades. Whereas nineteenth century and pre-war museums were seen as having collected everything they were offered in an uncontrolled acquisitive scramble, new professional approaches emphasised the need for greater discernment and, in particular, a local focus.

The museum in Leicester was an important centre for the development of the museum profession in the UK, with staff often being at the forefront of professional developments in the post war decades. The museum published a brochure on its work in 1952, aimed at a public audience. It gives prominence to the contrast between good current practice and poor practice of the past and emphasises systematic approaches to collecting:

> What happens in the museum?
>
> Haphazard collecting has given place to a scientific collection primarily centred on Leicestershire, borrowing exhibits from other museums as required, to act as a reminder that we are not quite the centre of the universe (Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1953: n/p).

The rhetoric deployed here is significant. Past practice was 'haphazard', whereas current practice is 'scientific'. The language implies precision, order and restraint. The reference to borrowing emphasises cooperation and collegiality which were seen at the time as a feature of professionalism.

Similar principles are embodied in a description of a temporary display at Bury Art Gallery, two decades later in 1973. The display had been designed to contrast collecting practice of the early twentieth century with current collecting practice, and consisted of two cases, one exemplifying collecting practice in each of the two eras:

> The 'then' display includes a mongoose in the coils of a cobra, a small number of curios, representing the vast quantity of such items donated to museums all over the country and some 'samples of colonial products'.
> Nowadays we are on the lookout for the familiar, everyday objects of yesteryear, illustrated here by a posser, a donkey stone and a knife cleaner, amongst other items all of which will be familiar to people from ordinary families who can remember the days before the war. (Bury Art Gallery 1973: n/p).

The newsletter acknowledges that the difference between collecting practice in the two eras has been 'exaggerated' for effect in this temporary display but nevertheless asserts that 'the difference between the whole outlook of museums then and now is a very real one.' This text contrasts the active collecting of the current era ('we are on the lookout for'), with the previous passive acceptance of a 'vast quantity' of donations. Again, a key difference between new and pre-war collecting practice is the local focus, which will be discussed further, below.

Better public service

I opened this survey of the ways in which museums discussed their modernisation with collecting, and collecting did tend to be at the top of most museums' lists when describing their activity in the immediate post-war period. But an account of the work of the City Museum in Bristol published in 1955 and attributed to the museum's director, F.S. Wallis bucks the trend in deliberately de-emphasising the importance of collecting, compared to activities with a public focus.

> Museums used to emphasise 'collecting', but now the emphasis is on the proper display of this accumulated material in order that it may be of maximum educational advantage and recreational interest to the community. New techniques of display and arrangement have helped to bring about this change and the public has certainly shown its appreciation of the new liveliness and vitality. Museums are no longer

mausoleums but living organisations serving the community and performing a real function in any social unit (Wallis, 1955: 305).

It is significant here that Wallis stresses the public aspects of the museum's role, its commitment to display, education, and community service. Rhetoric that associates museums of the past with dead things ('mausoleums' here) is common in these descriptions of improved practice, but the authors frequently assert that, while museums of the past were dead, the museums of the present day are alive and ready to provide a service to the public. Similar rhetoric recurs in a description of the nature of a modern museum given in the Annual Reports for the City Museum in Sheffield, for 1958 to 1960 (published in a single volume covering two years).

> In the nineteenth century, when most of the municipal museums were founded, a museum consisted of little more than a building, often quite unsuited for its purpose, containing a rich mixture of objects from the four corners of the earth.
> …By the turn of the century…the unchanging displays had gathered dreariness and dust. In consequence, the very word "museum" acquired a distasteful flavour, which lingers yet.
> The modern museum, accepting the challenge presented by this inherited connotation, seeks to change the image which the word creates in many minds by changing its own conception of the museum's place in the community. The museum no longer considers itself to be simply a building, with unusual contents, which the public may visit if they choose…It is now a service, more concerned with people than with things.
> …The modern museum is alive; it is no longer a passive receiver of relics, but an active force in the community (City of Sheffield, 1960: 4).

Again, the report's author draws a contrast between the 'dust' of the past and the vitality of the present, with the museum being presented as 'alive' and an 'active force'. This report also presents the museum as moving beyond a focus on collecting and collections ('a passive receiver of relics', 'a building, with unusual contents') to a focus on serving audiences. For a museum in 1960 to claim to be 'more concerned with people than things' may seem surprising: we may think of a focus on people as being a more recent phenomenon in museums but this quotation shows that it - or at least the aspiration to work in this way - was a strand of museum practice over fifty years ago.

Better staff, better service

Descriptions of improvements to museums in this period often highlight changes to their staffing and professional practice. A brochure produced to celebrate the centenary of Leicester

Museum and Art Gallery in 1949, for example, concludes with the assertion that the museum 'is adjusting itself to the needs of changing times':

> It has passed from the care of gifted amateurs to that of a professional staff and a specialised technique for the preservation and display of specimens has been developed (Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1949: 12).

This contrast between the work of 'amateurs' and the 'specialised technique' of a 'professional staff' recurs in a brochure produced to celebrate the centenary of Paisley museum in 1970, which serves as one final example to illustrate this utopian impulse. It emphasises the changing nature of the museum's staff, contrasting an amateurish and self-serving approach from the past with contemporary professional approaches.

> As museum collections have improved, so too have the standards of the staff who maintain them. No longer are these posts for retired service or professional men or for the local novice who will collect and preserve his own particular material to the exclusion of everything else. The museum staff of today are trained professionals, specialists in the field, who can bring expert academic knowledge and the necessary technical skills to bear on any problem that might present itself…The museum can now offer a comprehensive and professional service to its public (Burgh of Paisley, 1970: 47).

In both of these extracts, we see the professionalism of the museum staff brought into the public view for scrutiny, and presented as a condition of the museum's modernity. This professional competence is seen as combining 'technical' skill and specialist 'academic' knowledge. This public focus on professionalism reflects the changing nature of work and the public sector during this period and I intend now to reflect on the construction of museum professional identity, and its utopian aspects, in its contemporary context.

A professional utopia?

In the post-war period and particularly during the 1960s, the notion of professionalism gained a wider currency in the UK. The definition of what constituted a professional expanded to cover people working in a wider range of occupations, whereas its application had previously tended to be restricted to a narrow group of specialist areas, primarily law, medicine and the church. In particular, people who worked within public sector organisations and in administration and management began to assert professional status and to use professionalism as a synonym for competence. In fact, the quotation from Paisley Museum exemplifies the shift in meaning of 'professional'. The word is used both in its earlier, restricted sense

('retired service or professional men') and then in its new, broader sense ('trained professional'). This new, expanded professionalism is scrutinised in a 1964 study by sociologist, Geoffrey Millerson, *The Qualifying Associations.* Millerson uses the lens of the professional association as a means to scrutinise the diverse range of occupations then claiming professional status and his study includes, briefly, the Museums Association, demonstrating that people who worked in museums were perceived by others outside the sector as participating in this project of professionalisation (Millerson, 1964).

Millerson identifies a self-conscious approach to work and the status and nature of that work as a key element of professionalism. This kind of self-consciousness is exactly that expressed in the quotation above from Paisley, where the question of professional status is brought into public view. Millerson identifies a number of ways in which that self-consciousness around professionalism might be exhibited:

> Growth of self-awareness probably constitutes the most important element contributing to professionalization. This display of self-consciousness is demonstrated in various ways, for example:
> (a) by dissatisfaction with available training and education for the occupation
> (b) by attempts to standardize practice and to introduce theoretical analysis of work.
> (c) by concern with low standards, bad workmanship, indifferent handling of clients
> (d) by attempts to establish co-ordination and co-operation between practitioners,
> (e) by protests about lack of recognition for the occupation,
> (f) by belief in the emergence of a new and different discipline with wide applications (Millerson, 1964: 12).

The examples cited in the first section of this paper relate specifically to Millerson's point (c). The authors quoted identify shortcomings in earlier practice and use their condemnation of these low standards as a means of signalling distance from them and their own, superior practice. The utopian aspect of professionalisation, the idealistic drive for perfected standards and practice, can also be traced in other points on Millerson's list, in particular point (a) on training, point (b) on the standardisation of practice and (d) on cooperation.

Attempts to establish better coordination and cooperation between people working in museums were a particular feature of this period. The sector-wide Museums Association (MA) had been in existence since 1889 (Lewis, 1989) but it was, by this period, seen as rather remote and unresponsive. The Museum Assistant's Group (MAG), which had been

established in 1948 to represent more junior staff and which, over time, had come to act as a kind of 'ginger group' for the MA, was a forum for new ideas and the kind of yearning for better practice expressed in the reports quoted above (Mastoris, 2012). In the 1970s, MAG sponsored the establishment of a number of specialist groups, some representing subject areas such as geology and archaeology, some representing professional specialisms such as education. At the same time, other groups, not initiated by MAG, came into being on a wave of enthusiasm for working together (Smart, 1978). Although differing in focus, these groups were all characterised by a utopian desire to build a better museum sector.

Dissatisfaction with available training, Millerson's point (a), led to the establishment of the first university course in museum studies, at the University of Leicester. The establishment of university courses is recognised in studies of professionalisation as a common stage in the consolidation of a sense of professional identity (Abbott, 1988). The Leicester course had been under discussion from the early 1960s and accepted its first group of students in the 1966 to 1967 academic year. The establishment of the Leicester course was shortly followed by a similar course at the University of Manchester course, with a fine and decorative art focus. These two remained the only post-graduate museum studies courses in the UK for nearly 20 years until University College London established an archaeology-based course in 1986 (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1987).

In its early years, the Leicester course had the reputation of providing 'a licence to drive a museum' (Mullins, 2012). It aimed to ensure its graduates had the combination of 'expert academic knowledge and the necessary technical skills' cited in the extract from the Paisley museum brochure quoted above. It included much hands-on practical training: students were taught how use Letraset in displays and how to make casts in plaster of Paris (Mullins, 2012; Kavanagh, 2012). It also aimed to build strong foundations of the specialist knowledge curators needed: until 1980, history students, for example, completed major elements of the Masters course in the Department of English Local History at the University of Leicester.

By the 1980s, however, new staff in the Department were encouraging a more theoretical focus. History students no longer studied with the Local History department but took in-house courses focusing on history in museums. The shift arose partly from a concern that some of the old practical training was redundant and that new intellectual approaches

were needed (Kavanagh, 2012). But it was also motivated by a desire to encourage students to think more critically about museum practice.

Around the time of the change, there was much criticism of the balance between practical, specialist and theoretical elements. Sam Mullins, a graduate of the course in its old format and then the editor of the newsletter of the specialist group for history curators argued, for example, that the 'balance' of the course had tipped too much towards theoretical 'museology' and away from the specialist and practical knowledge that historians would need if they were to 'assess the priorities for research and collection…in their first post as the only social historian in a small county museum service or one-man band district council museum' or to 'deal with recording a building threatened with demolition, and ageing craftsman, a metal detector's "treasures", with picture research for a new exhibition' or a number of other aspects of the curator's role which Mullins argues are 'an everyday feature of the job yet find scant mention in the Learning Goals of the Dept. of Museum Studies' (Mullins, 1981: 2).

This conflict became particularly acute when the Department of Museum Studies in Leicester took on responsibility for delivering in-service training to people working towards the MA's professional qualification, the Diploma. The very first course was so badly managed that students described a sense of 'mutiny' and drew up a list of grievances to present to teaching staff (GRSM, 1981). Although things improved after the initial, disastrous course, criticism rumbled on throughout the 1980s, which seems to have arisen in part from the difficulty of reconciling the theoretical and ideas-based teaching of a university department with a more pragmatic, worldly approach of experienced staff.

This conflict is unsurprising, viewed from the perspective of sociological studies of professional work and training. In his study of the professions, for example, Abbott gives the example of university librarianship courses. He argues the purpose of university training is more than merely utilitarian and that the presence of a body of associated academic knowledge, such as the theory of indexing systems serves to enhance to status of librarianship, legitimising it and increasing its cultural worth, so that 'the true use of academic professional knowledge is less practical than symbolic' (Abbott, 1988: 54).

Freidson's study of professions and professionalisation identifies potential for a conflict between academic and professional approaches, arising from what may be the utopian impulse of the university:

> [The university's] protected circumstances also encourage it to create standards for work performance that emphasize the ideal and demean the improvisations required of colleagues who must adapt to the confusion and impurity of practical affairs where knowledge is incomplete and resources finite (Freidson, 2001: 99 – 100).

The conflict between the 'ideal' and 'the impurity of practical affairs' was manifest other in initiatives designed to improve museum practice in this era and in the next section I examine one of these: the drive to improve documentation and to computerise museum records.

An information utopia?

The 1960s onwards saw significant investment in documentation in UK museums and there was an attempt to establish a consistent approach to data management across the UK museum sector. The Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA) was established in 1967, with government funding to establish ways of standardising museum documentation, with a view to its eventual computerisation. The group began by developing a series of record cards, with the aim of there being one for each museum discipline, along with an instruction book describing how the cards should be used. By 1980 there were 20 cards and 18 instruction books available (Roberts, Light and Stewart, 1980). These cards and instruction books, each worked out by a group of curators from the relevant discipline, represented an attempt to standardise and professionalise the hugely disparate and individualised approaches to documentation of collections.

Using the IRGMA cards necessitated a highly structured approach to recording information, which all had to be assigned to a relevant field. Completing the cards was a labour-intensive and time-consuming task. In fact, the large-scale implementation of the IRGMA system was only possible because of the providential availability of large numbers of trainees, working on government-funded schemes designed to tackle the high levels of unemployment in the UK in the 1970s and early 1980s (Lees, 2012).

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, both Labour and Conservative governments invested heavily in job creation and training through the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The MSC's first training programme, the Job Creation Scheme had a very broad remit: any organisation could apply for trainees to work on almost any project that could be shown to have community benefit. Museums made extensive use of the scheme for a huge range of activities. A number of new open-air or site museums used MSC labour to rebuild historic buildings, or to establish parts of the site. And many established museums used

trainees to record parts of their collections using the IRGMA cards. Some of these trainees were graduates in relevant disciplines who were determined to forge a museum career, and a few were highly knowledgeable, with postgraduate qualifications. Others were simply unemployed young people who needed a job and the quality of their work was naturally variable (Lees, 2012).

The JCS was described by one curator writing in a contemporary newsletter as being 'like manna from heaven' (King, 1977: 1) in terms of the sudden availability of resources, but with serious implications for museums' management of their collections: 'If, for example, IRGMA is indeed meant to herald "the dawning of museum professionalism" why are we employing amateurs to work the system?'(King, 1977: 2). King goes on to answer her own question, noting that underfunding leaves most museums with no choice: completing the cards was so onerous that this professionalisation of practice was only possible because of the availability of free and unprofessional labour.

Conclusion: a museum utopia for visitors?

In the development of the IRGMA system, we see one potential problem with the utopian impulse in professional practice: it can lead to the development of solutions which, focused on a theoretically perfect approach, fail to adapt themselves to the constraints of an imperfect context: funding limitations and a lack of staff time, for instance. In this respect, the best can be the enemy of the good if, by setting standards too high, organisations fail to get any kind of workable system in place. In practice, museums do seem to have found ways to compromise and get a good enough job done, the example of the extensive use of MSC trainees rather than fully-trained professional staff to complete the IRGMA records being one case in point.

However, there is a further potential problem with these utopian impulses: not that the best is necessarily the enemy of the good, but that the energetic pursuit of one 'good' can blind practitioners to other 'goods'. Professional utopianism can lead to a focus on ideal practice as an end in itself, with practitioners losing sight of the impact of their practice in the world. The pursuit of high standards in collections care and documentation may lead to a neglect of other areas of museum practice, such as excellent communication with audiences.

It is perfectly possible to make the case that museums can only serve audiences well if the resources they need to tell compelling stories – their collections and the knowledge associated with those collections – are well cared for. But in the period under review, the

utopian idea of professional practice was arguably not focused on the needs of audiences and was certainly not always articulated in terms of a vision of how the public might be better served by better practice. This is not to imply that professionalism was self-serving: on the contrary, many people who worked in museums placed great emphasis on public service. However, their view of what constituted excellent public service was defined through a professional lens. In entering collections information onto IRGMA cards, for example, people who worked in museums were driven by a desire to care for public collections well, but had little notion of how the information they were recording might actually be put to public use. Professional utopianism is concerned with doing things right, with improving practice, but from the professional's point of view, not the visitors. Indeed improvements to practice were sometimes driven by professional dogma almost at the expense of audiences, in spite of the emergence of rhetoric such as that seen in the extracts from Bristol and Sheffield which attempts to emphasise the importance of visitors. An illustration of this can be seen in one final quotation from the professional literature of the period under review.

From the 1950s to 1970s, the UK Trustees of the Carnegie Foundation (CUKT) invested heavily in supporting museums, funding a number of initiatives by the Museums Association. They also supported redisplays in many UK museums but their approach was somewhat interventionist. They would only fund developments that adhered to a set of guidelines about good display and good collecting policy (Ross, 1960). One element of the Carnegie orthodoxy was that museums should focus on collecting and displaying local material, in contrast to the traditional local museum approach from the nineteenth century, which typically included small amounts of ethnography, archaeology and natural history from other parts of the world. This local focus had been recommended in the influential report on the non-national museum sector by Frank Markham, commissioned by CUKT just before World War Two (Markham, 1938), and professional consensus was emerging about the superiority of this local focus by the 1950s, as reflected in the extracts from the brochures from Leicester in 1953 and Bury in 1973, quoted above.

Elgin Museum was redisplayed, with funding from CUKT in the late 1950s. The curator of Elgin Museum , W.A. Ross, wrote a report about the redevelopment, and noted that after the initial burst of enthusiasm, visitor figures were disappointing and were actually lower than before the redevelopment. Reflecting on why this might be, he speculated that audiences and young people in particular might 'miss the wild things of wood and forest from overseas'

(Ross, 1960: 384). Ross uses romantic, evocative language here, very much at odds with the brochure from Leicester quoted above, which emphasised the superiority of 'scientific' approaches over 'haphazard' collecting. He suggests that the former approach favoured the unfamiliar and exciting, in contrast to an approach exemplified in the account of collecting practice in Bury which emphasises the 'familiar' and the 'everyday'. In Ross's account, something has been lost through the imposition of a correct, professional approach. His analysis hints at a fear that, although the new museum displays were, from a professional point of view, superior to the old displays, they lacked excitement and charm, and that visitors found them dry and boring.

Ross's anxiety reflects the limits of the utopian pursuit of professionalism: it can be rather inward-looking and does not necessarily take account of what visitors want. More recent museum practice has recognised this and has tended to redirect the utopian impulse outwards, becoming more concerned with the impact of museums on their audiences and on broader society. In contemporary museum practice and contemporary museum studies, there is an increasing emphasis on the 'rights' of visitors and on museums' responsibility to promote ideals such as equality, diversity and social justice (see for example, Sandell and Nightingale, 2012). Such approaches require new kinds of professional practice and a new, more expansive understanding of what is 'best' and 'good' within museums and within society. They reposition the professional ideal from being about the pursuit of excellent practice, to being about the impact on users and in doing so may seek to disrupt the traditional dynamics of the relationship between the professional and the user, decentring the professional's practice, however excellent in favour of a focus on the rights and aspirations of users.

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What We Know About Our Audiences: Utopian or Cynical Behaviour?

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Abstract

Visitor Research in art museums is increasingly becoming an issue in cultural management on an international level. However, even among specialists in the subject, the role of this research is not absolutely clear. Through twenty interviews with museum staff members conducted in four French and Spanish art museums, this paper attempts to highlight various incongruities in the application of Visitor Research, and aims to be an initial endeavour in analysing the significance of these studies in the everyday life of museums. Museum staff express their perceptions, opinions and doubts about their use of Visitor Studies as a set of tools for designing public-oriented cultural policies. Our principal results show a relatively homogeneous landscape: what appears to be a widely applicable and practical analytical instrument, visitor studies, may in fact betray its own primary (utopian?) ideals[i].

Keywords: Visitor studies, Art museum management, France, Spain, Qualitative methods

Visitor Research: themes, problems and analytical approaches.

There is a large body of scientific literature seeming to indicate the efficiency of Visitor Research in aiding cultural institutions and, in this specific case, art museums, to pursue their missions and to define their targets (Colbert, 2003: 32-33; Kotler et al., 2008: 87). Also, significant changes in museum organization have taken place: museums have changed from being predominately custodial institutions to becoming increasingly focused on audience attraction (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002: 757). From this perspective, the philosophy of Visitor Research is also usually associated with audience development. The term 'audience development' is used by the Arts Council of England[ii] and other institutions with a broad range of meanings: it emphasizes a certain democratizing intent and a strong participatory spirit[iii] which 'goes beyond the concept of just *audience building'* (Bamford and Wimmer, 2012: 9).

However, in its praxis, particularly within the field of art museums and galleries, this kind of research encounters several obstacles in establishing itself (Savage, 1996: 3). While it seems to be a topic of interest at the moment (as proved by some very recent examples in the VSA Annual Conference[iv]), its use in some French and Spanish art museums seems to conceal certain dark areas, even in cases where Visitor Studies are a well-established practice of evaluation. As an 'evolving, controversial and dynamic field' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007: 362)

Visitor Research is currently criticised for its inability to bear on the internal management of museums, on political and strategic decisions, and for its lack of influence in patterns of cultural democratization and legitimation (Caune, 2006), elements typically related to Visitor Research.

For the purposes of this paper, we can consider Visitor Research as having a double level of influence. The first level is measured at close hand: it is based on those activities that directly involve visitors and their experiences within the museum. The second level of impact should be considered from a broader perspective, taking in the transfer of results to internal management and the production of information significant for policy makers: in this case Visitor Research is the practical consequence of an interpretative paradigm of public-oriented cultural management which includes the points of view of audiences in the conceptualization of policies and strategies in museums and cultural institutions. In this paper we assume that some current concerns in the field of Visitor Studies probably flow from some of the weaknesses and ambiguities perceived within their first level of impact, where direct contact with the public in the everyday life of the museum takes place (See diagram 1).
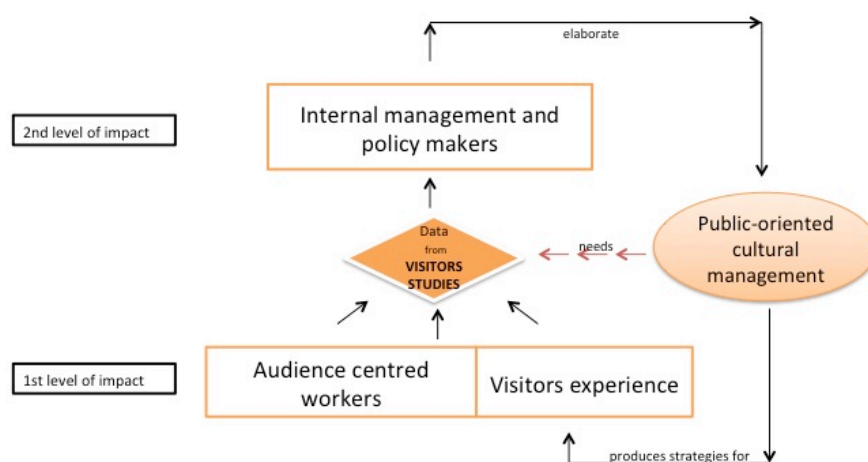

Diagram 1. The double level of influence of Visitor Research. Elaborated by G. Romanello

Our starting point is the holistic observation of a certain degree of distrust towards this kind of research displayed by those who are responsible for producing the studies, and who do the actual audience-centred work. Making use of the evidence and data collected through interviews and case study work, our focus of observation shifts from audiences to museum employees. Instead of openly observing the aims and the results of visitor studies (which could be, as we know, the social composition of audiences, their exhibition-attending habits, their judgments and behaviours, their satisfaction with the services offered, etc.), we direct our

attention, first, to the root causes of the need for visitor surveys. Subsequently we focus on the consequences that visitor studies have or may have in the everyday life of the museum.

As far as possible we let our first-person narrators express their perception from the inside of their own institutions; thus they can provide us with insights on how Visitor Studies, as an instrument for producing data, are received, and above all, the way in which such data is interpreted and exploited. This will afford us insights into the public-oriented cultural policies promoted in the museums concerned. Through the narration of experiences and impressions, we try to give Visitor Research a different meaning; we ask whether the theoretic framework of Visitor Studies is respected, or whether, on the contrary, and as we assume, these premises merely cover over a very different substratum.

> Art museums have traditionally been underrepresented in the visitor studies community, due in part to the fact that most don't employ internal evaluators and in part to a perception that art museum curators and directors aren't interested in scientific, objective measurement of visitor outcomes (VSA Conference 2012: 48).

This perception is not something new. The artistic, political and economic motives driving art museums do not always coincide with the day-to-day issues of staff working with visitors' experience, and this generates frictions between departments. Our hypothesis is that an interest in knowledge about visitors and audiences can also yield us information on the relationships between the different levels of museum organization. Particularly, the flux of information offered by Visitor Research is found to be dependent on a previously existing hierarchy, a rigid chain of command between the departments, which avoids changes inside museums, contrary to recent public-oriented management and social trends. In fact, what emerges is that the possibility of including audiences' needs in the museum management design, based on the use of information resulting from Visitor Research, is hindered and turned into a functional attitude; a 'ceremony' used to show the 'correct way' of working, while at the same time being disappointing in relation to its (perhaps utopian?) ideals; it tends to generate a wide-ranging theoretical framework, without having any relevant effects on internal management.

Answering the question of whether or not Visitor Research can afford museums an opportunity to modify museum programming, and take on the challenge of public-oriented policies and cultural democratization, is beyond the aims of this paper. However, we do raise some objections to the role currently played by Visitor Studies, though from a limited perspective of four particular cases. Finally, we leave open some questions on how the value of audience-focused approaches is perceived.

Some notes on methodology

We consider methodology to be a fundamental feature of our research, since it is in itself a way of approaching the subject. Here we have applied a qualitative method in both collecting and analysing our findings; and it is worth remembering that the goal of qualitative inquiry is not to reproduce reality descriptively, but to add insights and understanding (Morse and Richards, 2002: 88). Incidentally, some level of subjectivity may also result.

The information on which our analysis is based was obtained from twenty in-depth interviews. This technique allowed us to have access to information which is very difficult to collect in other ways, such as accounts of past situations and controversies or internal meetings for which formal records simply do not exist (Taylor and Bogdan, 1986: 101). In this particular case, in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed us to gather opinions, assumptions, beliefs and values enabling us to reconstruct the symbolic universe of reference points underpinning action in these museums. These personal and subjective contributions help us to identify the essential elements of the issue (starting from the relative presence of the concept of democratization of culture), as a theoretical justification at the root of actors' actions. The participants, all members of the museums' staff, were selected according to the degree of their direct involvement with community members and visitors, due to the more in-depth knowledge of visitors we expected them to have developed. Table 1 shows the distribution of the interviews over the selected museums (see next page).

We consider these people as key informants on their contexts, since they are the principal actors at the outset of the process of public participation. Most of them are the people who physically carry out the studies; they are the first to generate this kind of knowledge in their museums.

The information from interviews was supplemented with empirical research (analysis of recent and older visitor studies, scrutiny of the public policy of each institution, and observation of audience development activities) and documental analysis, including reports, statements, studies and internal communications provided by the participants[v].

For the purpose of this paper, and to be able to include a comparative angle to our case studies, we selected four museums, two Spanish and two French. They are all leading institutions in the contemporary art field, comparable in visitor numbers, organizational typology and management models: the Centre Pompidou (CP) and the Palais de Tokyo (PT), both based in Paris, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS) and the

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (MTB), both Madrid-based. As an empirically-oriented piece of research, this paper is centred on observation of these specific cases. The framework is designed to be homogeneous: four major contemporary art museums, two per country and, alternatively, two public institutions plus two partially externally financed museums; all of them located in the heart of their respective capital cities; in all these museums the core activity centres on promoting temporary exhibitions, though not forgetting the exploitation of their permanent collections in attracting tourists. Although this coincidence of internal variables does not afford us a representative view, it lends a certain homogeneity to the subject of research.

Interviewed	Departement / Service	Museum
E1	Direction de l'action éducative et des publics	CP
E2	Direction de l'action éducative et des publics	CP
E3	Direction de l'action éducative et des publics	CP
E4	Departement des publics et de l'education	PT
E5	Departement des publics	PT
E6	Departement des publics	PT
E7	Departement des publics	PT
E8	Dirección de actividades públicas	MNCARS
E9	Dirección de actividades públicas	MNCARS
E10	Dirección de actividades públicas	MNCARS
E11	Dirección de actividades públicas	MNCARS
E12	Departamento de educación	MNCARS
E13	Departamento de educación	MNCARS
E14	Departamento comercial	MNCARS
E15	Departamento de Desarrollo educativo	MTB
E16	Departamento de Desarrollo educativo	MTB
E17	Departamento de Administración e informática	MTB
E18	Recursos Humanos	MTB
E19	Recepción	MTB
E20	Area de Promoción y difución	MTB

Table 1. Distribution of interviews in the four study case museums. Elaborated by G. Romanello

Visitor studies in the French and Spanish national contexts: traditional and new scenarios
According to Hooper-Greenhill, 'looking at the development of visitor studies internationally, the degree of development is very uneven' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007: 363).

In France, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel's work *L'amour de l'art; les musées et leur public (*Bourdieu et al., 1969), which rapidly established itself as a classic, is generally considered the starting point of research on art consumption and museum visitors, underpinned

by the social and political goals of André Malraux's concept of cultural democratization (Donnat, 2003: 9). This work had a deep impact among museum professionals (Gob and Drouguet, 2006: 89) and had the merit of pushing the thrust of museum audience research towards a clear sociological and statistical approach, allowing Bourdieu's theories to have a widespread influence up to the present (Donnat, 1999: 148). Having recognized the disparity, ambiguities and inequalities in people's access to culture (Donnat, 2003: 10), France developed strategies which were (and are) aimed at finding some sort of cultural balance between social classes. The activities of the Department of the Prospective Studies and Statistics (*Département des Études de la Prospective et des Statistiques* - DEPS[vi]) are excellent examples of this approach (Eidelman et al., 2007). In this context Visitor Studies in France have consistently earned increasing authority and autonomy, both in the professional (as the growth of private consultancies demonstrates) and in the academic fields; and the growing number of publications and specialised academic degrees is also proof of this[vii]. Further, with the setting-up of the Permanent Observatory of Audiences[viii] in 1989 and the activities of the Department of Audience Policies (*Département de la Politique des Publics*, part of the *Direction des Musées de France* - DMF, an organ of the Ministry of Culture specifically devoted to museums), Visitor Research achieved a wider perspective.

The two French museums we have selected here for the purpose of our research are both active participants in ministerial programs and initiatives; they collaborate actively in the development of a large range of institutional projects, but above all they are accustomed to communicating with state institutions, as evidenced by our interviews. These reveal an intense activity of communication involving personally both museum staff and the DMF, with a powerful and continuous exchange of data and opinions.

In Spain, the interest in museum visitor studies, as a praxis and as a discipline, is much more recent. The first available works in this field emerged in the early eighties (Alarcón, 2007: 1), but it was not until a decade later that Visitor Research became a wider subject of study and started to gain currency among experts and cultural managers. Previously, the main lines of research were focused on visitor behaviours – the frequency and pace of visits – within a mostly descriptive approach. Nevertheless, this body of research does not seem to have led to any methodological development, since it basically stemmed from sporadic and personal curiosity and initiative. Also, those initial works have been criticised because often they did not respect methodological constraints regarding coherence and objectivity (Pérez Santos, 2008: 23). From the early nineties onwards increasing awareness and use of visitor studies, both in

theory and in practice, has provided subject matter for conferences and has likewise stimulated academic debate. Some major personalities stand out: Angela García Blanco for her educational approach (García Blanco, 1999), Mikel Asensio for his cognitive perspective[ix] and Eloisa Pérez Santos, a psychologist working on Audience Research since the very beginning and author of perhaps the most important publication in the field in Spanish, *Estudio de visitantes en museos: metodología y aplicaciones* (Pérez Santos, 2000).

Today Visitor Research is a growing field and the current climate of change in the cultural sector has partially increased its significance. Just a few years ago, in 2009, and with Perez Santos' direct involvement, the Permanent Laboratory on Museum Audiences (LPPM)[x], a service within the Ministry of Culture, was created in Madrid. From the point of view of internal organization, it is worth mentioning that the Laboratory is not a fully developed service, as the French Department of Audience Policies essentially is; moreover, the research projects they are carrying out remain at a very preliminary stage. In fact, only recently the Reina Sofia Museum was involved in a visitor study conducted by the LPPM.

We would like to focus on two major questions that were raised during our interviews in Spain. The first deals with the lack of engagement that staff members complain of: 'We were not asked for our opinions or services' (E12, MNCARS) and 'Nobody took part in the decision-making process, we just received the proposal, and we accepted it, as it stood' (E8, MNCARS). This statement becomes yet more meaningful when we take into account that, while most public-centred work is carried out by the Education Department, this study involves, in the organization of both economic and human resources, only the Administrative Department of the museum. Furthermore, we could consider the LPPM as a good practical example at national level, as it is not free from museum staff's prejudices and scepticism: 'I'm afraid it will be just another tool used to control our work…' (E9, MNCARS).

Despite this, what seems noteworthy is the current on-going improvement of cultural policies (and with that, attention to audiences). Here we can highlight the difficulties that Spanish cultural policy has to face in becoming a strong government sector of action, whereas in France over the last decade it has been a recognized reality. The creation of public cultural institutions in Spain, although fragmentary and local, seems to suggest that France will not always be considered an exception in southern Europe; indeed, French structures seem to have been taken as a model (as more than one Spanish informant confirmed to us), perhaps not accidentally.

Internal consumption, unpredictable decisions, the need for validation: how visitor studies arise.

The first range of issues that we came across concerns the identification of the reasons for museums deciding to perform a study of their visitors. The data we collected reveals some tendencies: contrary to what we generally tend to think, the interests that lead museums to collect information on their public do not emerge from a general need for an audience development strategy, nor from the desire to democratize culture or, in this specific case, to democratize access to contemporary art[xi]. Among the criteria that motivate a commitment to visitor studies, there are no high ideals, but a more modest degree of self-awareness, a personal sensibility shown by the individual who freely decides whether or not to carry out the study:

> Nobody asks me to do it; I decide when we need to know something more about my (*sic*) visitors […] I know the management wants to receive some data about visitors, the way I do it doesn't matter; so I prefer to build up a survey, because I need it to be written down (E7, PT).

What seems to motivate the undertaking of a visitor study is the personal experience of the individual and her/his staff. The majority of interviewees described themselves as experts in this specific field and in audience development strategies. Most of them had received a specialised academic or professional training in these areas. Furthermore they stated that when the decision is taken to put a visitor study on their agenda, it is neither the consequence of a pre-existing internal need, nor an organized and scheduled operation, but simply a voluntary individual decision. This attitude suggests a hypothetical approach to the internal consumption of the visitor study itself and may indicate the absence of any kind of detailed plan or internal strategic vision which might later require the information eventually produced. In fact, according to several interviewees, the order does not come from any higher level. If this is so, it is easy to imagine how knowledge about visitors is still far from being perceived as a priority for the museum's functioning. The presence of specially trained staff and their professed autonomy in decision-making does not automatically mean a mutual awareness of the benefits of visitor studies within the cultural organization. Our interviewees' stories of difficulties in internal communication and interdepartmental cooperation increased this impression.

One of our informants, speaking about the beginning of his career, declared: 'The management once expressed its intention of engaging in visitor studies, but finally nothing really happened!'(E5, PT). However, this weak interest shown by the management and curatorship departments does not really rule out some kind of personal engagement, although

its potential action is fairly limited: as a matter of fact, despite all the difficulties (for example, there are constant complaints of lack of human and economic resources), some kind of survey or enquiry is usually scheduled.

When asked directly about the aims of the research under way, one informant states candidly: '...for reasons that have not yet been thought through, we have not yet decided' (E3,CP). This statement seems to denote a certain unpredictability in fixing study objectives. This reported weakness of the initial research project, as its lack of a clear structure of objectives seems to indicate, may prevent the entire project from reaching any positive conclusion.

Another finding that emerged concerns the need to produce concrete and objective data on museum staff's day-to-day work and tasks. This need for the validation of their actions towards their managers turns visitor studies into a monitoring tool in the service of the organisation, which seems to provide information on accounting, as well as an assessment of staff's professionalism. 'It mostly means validating what I do', one informant says, and, 'This will enable me to justify my goals and issues' (E4, PT).

So, from being an instrument especially elaborated to provide knowledge about audiences, it became clearer that Visitor Studies have progressively evolved into self-regarding initiatives responding more to internal power struggles than marketing strategies, probably parallel to concurrent changes in museum organizations (Bayart, 1993; Tobelem and Rosenberg, 2005). Visitor figures are essential, but, as one of the informers tells us: 'Yes, here we have some little details, important details, but in the end they have infinitely little weight compared to the sponsors or the curatorship' (E7, PT).

The deeper meaning of the social approach to improving policy-making strategies in the field of cultural access, which was at the origin of the development of visitor studies in France, is apparently overshadowed by more practical and tangible concerns, as we have just seen. It is possible to judge this behaviour as rhetorical and hypocritical: while on the one hand, museums are capturing visitors (by supporting educational programs or claiming that they cater to specific communities), on the other, they are aware of excluding visitors from consideration in other areas: 'Curatorship remains the priority, in terms of budgets, strategic orientation and stakeholders' needs. We just have to learn and be satisfied; the artistic side of museum is still dominant!' (E7, PT).

Observing the organizational charts of these museums, it becomes obvious that curatorial services still hold a dominant position, subordinating public and educational services

even in terms of allocation of human and economic resources, as Vera Zolberg affirms in one of her most important critiques (Zolberg, 1981: 123). Once more, the official institutional intention, stated explicitly in official documents, seems to conflict with what is actually subjectively perceived by our informants, who generally contradict or deflate the authorized version[xii]. Aside from the rhetoric always found in these types of statement, they seem to contrast sharply with our informants' views; the latter clearly believe that there exists a certain cynicism in their institutions' presenting a friendly face to the public, although this impression is not (sufficiently) supported by the facts.

After the studies: probing the data is not always possible

When speaking about the effects that visitor studies produce or should produce, and, later, staff's perception of the effects they actually have, what mostly emerges is not an entirely positive assessment. First, the results achieved seem to be perceived as weak and unconvincing: as one participant exclaimed: 'This isn't exactly a big surprise!'(E3, CP) Second, these results are rarely capable of crossing the boundaries of the service or department they have been produced by. If this is so, visitor studies seem to have no consequences in the other levels of the museum organization. Once more, this suggests a certain internal need and an economy of internal consumption of knowledge about audiences or, as one interviewee explained, insufficient interdepartmental communication and cooperation: 'After that, I really don't know what they'll do with it!' (E14, MNCARS). In response to an outright request for some practical example which could specifically demonstrate the importance attached to visitors' experiences recorded in a survey, most interviewees hesitated over their answer: 'Unfortunately, to tell the truth, I haven't been able to examine or really exploit my survey results; I haven't had time to do it, and nobody but me is in charge of doing it, so...' (E4, PT).

Visitor research seems not to be a priority among staff's tasks. Lack of time and shortage of human resources: as we have seen time and again, this situation seems to suggest insufficient organization skills. The preliminary proposal for a visitor study of this type does not include the need for the extra time and hands which would ensure the study a fruitful outcome. Moving from data to knowledge and from knowledge to action does not seem to respond to the initial aims of a visitor study. So, if data analysis is not a priority, why carry out a study?

Given this ambiguous perception of Visitor Studies, what could this paradox, this perceived distance between ideals and reality, mean?

They respected our work, but they didn't do much with it. Or they had a utilitarian attitude; they took what they wanted, the numbers ... but the truth is that I have this feeling of isolation, and I think that certain managers were interested in certain figures, well, only in certain figures (E7, PT).

This may be seen as a complaint about a certain laxness in management and curatorship, a complaint condemning the utilitarian use of information about audiences, as an unexpected consequence of the managerial emphasis on marketing and economics (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002: 750). Thus: 'We can't close our eyes to it! The artistic management is stronger than us!' (E15, MTB). Consideration is given to carrying out some visitor studies; as a sort of politeness, 'They're tolerated because of their social value more than for any benefits that could be got out of them.' (E7, PT). The example of the Centre Pompidou is even more significant: this museum has a long and powerful tradition of inquiry into its audiences. At their origins Visitor Studies in the Beaubourg were thoroughly grounded in Bourdieu's social theories and deeply committed to the French project of democratizing culture. Yet the interpretations and the uses made of these studies has progressively shifted towards marketing approaches (Quemin, 2011: 59), even though their formal contents have not significantly changed.

We have to be realistic. We have to admit that we all depend on the Minister of Culture. This means that audience development is always seen by them as a good option. Our managers are always delighted to know that some kind of visitor studies are being carried out, even more when there's no budget required for it. So they let us get on with our job. But we will never have any decision-making power (E7, PT).

What emerges here is one of the core ideas which has been present throughout this analysis: the lack, in the upper levels of museum organizations, of commitment to producing and making use of knowledge on audiences, is strongly perceived by museum staff, even in the context of more general public-oriented policies. In addition, they confided to us their feelings of low self-esteem, alienation, disillusion, and these feelings strongly suggest that this may not be a perception, but possibly an actual practice: that in these museum organizations, doing research into audiences is considered an appearance-based action, an alibi which is very useful in order not to forget that 'Our public mission is not so clear as it seems...' (E6, PT). Ideals do not coincide with reality. The common feeling of responsibility towards museum visitors is in conflict with the impossibility of respecting this ethic. In fact, our interviewees show a clear-headed assessment of the facts, with no illusions about the consequences of their activities: 'In the end [in visitor studies] … it seems to me that what we call the time-utility relationship is too complex, in terms of the relationship between effort and results, I mean' (E14, MNCARS).

Discussion

This paper does not represent a definitive assessment of the situations described. These remain open to multiple readings; some statements may even be interpreted as contradictory. However in these few lines, with the aid of some evidence, we have tried to point up some of the ambiguities around the use of Visitor Research, particularly in public-oriented management schemes. We have tried to identify some essential points: despite a significant body of international literature, what appears to be a widespread and useful analytical instrument of cultural management seems to be undervalued and underused. In spite of appearances, in our encounters with museum staff we hoped that their feedback would be more positive, or at least more sympathetic, mirroring a well-recognised paradigm shift within museum management toward more public-oriented policies. The results we obtained show that, on the contrary to what might be expected, the desire to cultivate audiences by increasing our knowledge of them, and the desire to democratize access to culture (and the art world) should not be considered the main motive behind the interest in learning more about audiences. These desires are seen by staff as a utopian model, but not one that enables museums to innovate in public-oriented strategies. On the management side, a lack of clear objectives, a perceived insufficiency of resources, a sceptical view and, above all, a perception of a lack of direct benefits: all seem to indicate that Visitor Studies, in the institutions we looked at, are used as an alibi to justify actions and decisions already taken, much more than for audience development and improvements in services. Knowledge coming from research on museum audiences, even while it may evidence some kind of utopian foundation (in participants' references to democratisation and audience development), seems to have an additional almost ethical or even aesthetic function: Visitor Research is seen as the 'nice and good' way of going about things, regardless of the results obtained.

The active involvement of the audience in museum management thus appears as a functional attitude, a 'ceremony' used to demonstrate the 'correct way' of working, but it remains far from accomplishing its (possibly utopian) ideals; it tends to generate a wide-ranging theoretical framework, but without effective impact on management, policy or practice. Thus we may project a certain cynicism in the behaviour of the institution, which on the one hand continues publicly to recognise the importance of Visitor Studies, but on the other does not act on the information gathered by those studies. The hypothesis of the persistence of interdepartmental hierarchy (Zolberg, 1984: 386) preventing the flow of information toward

decision makers, and at the same time promoting neither cooperation nor change, may explain this behaviour: by supporting Visitor Studies, museums seek the complicity of their publics, but not in the way these studies might suggest.

Is this the answer to the challenges currently faced by museums: to turn to the visitors? Which visitors are we talking about? Are they merely neutral presences who interact commercially or politically with cultural policy? Or are we once more in the presence of a hierarchical culture, distant and insensitive to the needs of its audience, who are not admitted to participation in its entirely private decisions?

Acknowledgements

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[i] This paper is part of the work developed in my PhD dissertation. A previous and partial version of this research was presented at the seminar *Arts, culture, représentations. Europe, internationalisation, mondialisation* at the *Institut d'Etudes Européennes* of the *Université Paris-8* and an article has been accepted for publication by the French review *Marges, n°15 "Démocratiser l'art (contemporain)"*.

[ii] 'The term audience development describes activities undertaken specifically to meet the needs of existing and potential audiences and to help arts [and cultural] organisations to develop on-going relationships with audiences. It can include aspects of marketing, commissioning, programming, education, customer care and distribution'. *Audience development and marketing*, Arts Council of England, (2010) www.artscouncil.org.uk/.../audience_development_and_marketing (last view 27/11/2012).

[iii] 'Participatory' should be understood the way Nina Simon uses it in her enlightening work: Simon, N. (2010). *The participatory museum*, Santa Cruz.

[iv] VSA – Visitor Studies Association Annual Conference 'Knowing our past, shaping our future: what's next for visitor studies?', Raleigh 2012; we refer specifically to the session 'Are Art Museums Behind or Ahead of the Evaluation Curve?' where some examples of studies helping institutional shifts came from within the sector, usually dominated by the Science Museums (VSA Conference 2012: 46).

[v] All collected data has been treated using the software for qualitative analysis Atlas.ti: through the use of categorization and coding, this software helped us in doing an efficient analysis of words and observed situations by identifying relationships and dependences of cause and effect.

[vi] DEPS - *Département des études de la prospective et des statistiques, Ministère de la Culture et de la communication*: 'Thanks to the development of cultural statistics, it adds a qualitative and quantitative insight to the definition, orientation and decision-making process in the field of national cultural politics'.In 'Études et statistiques', http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Politiques-ministerielles/Etudes-et-statistiques/Le-DEPS, (last view 14/09/2010).

[vii] MA degree on "Management of cultural projects. Knowledge about publics" (*Conduite de Projets Culturels. Connaissance des publics*) in the Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Defense.

[viii] OPP -*Observatoire Permanent des Publics*; in 2001, after ten years of visitor research they published a study which involved one hundred museums: Observatoire Permanent des Publics & Mironer, L. (2001). *Cent musés à la rencontre du public*. Castebany: France Edition.

[ix] About this author, see also http://www.uam.es/personal_pdi/psicologia/asensio/ (last view 09/11/2012).

[x] LPPM - *Laboratorio Permanente de Publicos de Museos, Ministry of Culture*, Madrid.

xi The contemporary art field mostly remains a deeply elitist artistic field (Quemin, 2011: 58).

xiiStatement from the mission of the Museum Reina Sofia in Madrid, http://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo/mision_en.html, (last view 15/05/2012).

Creating alternative narrations, developing new forms of intermediation and forming active spectators are the Museum's main priorities. (…) The Museum proposes an educational conception that eliminates hierarchies and highlights the revitalizing power of culture, based on its conviction that each one of us knows how to rediscover and redefine knowledge.

Utopia and Digital Museum Policy in the Web 2.0.

Cristiano Agostino

Abstract

This article begins to address, through a theoretical review and an analysis of select primary sources, the complex interplay between museum digital policies for the Web; and the utopian rhetoric which underpins what is known as "Web 2.0." In particular, the article looks at the rhetorics of audience participation, inclusion and democratisation that museums routinely employ to justify the permanence of their cultural mandate in the digital realm: by looking at select "media strategy" documents, we can get a sense of the deep investment in the supposedly "inclusive" rhetorics of Web 2.0 that most museums seem to buy into, as they move their agency into the digital.

Keywords

Museum, Web 2.0, Utopia, Digital strategy.

Utopia and Digital Museum Policy in the Web 2.0.

In this article I aim to address some select facets of the current state of museums' web policies and the philosophies that guide them, as seen through the lens of one of the overarching paradigms of postmodern culture – the Western tradition of utopia. As I will suggest through the tools of literature review, theoretical discussion of current trends, and inspection of primary sources, the ongoing construction of paradigms for the development of museal web presences (be them web sites proper; outreach projects that involve the web in some capacity; or distribution of museal content by way of virtual third parties) owes a great debt to an utopia-fuelled ideal of social amelioration by creation of technology-supported 'alternative realities'. In this endeavour, institutions are buttressed by evolving controversial views on the relationship between museum and society, as well as a wealth of widespread, yet somewhat dubious theory systems, among which the most influential are: Web 2.0; social media; and folksonomies.

What Utopia is in Contemporary Culture

As the meaning of the term 'utopia' in our context is rather specific and the word is, more generally, widely deployed in academia in sometimes less than clear contexts, in order to define a seemingly infinite series of issues, attitudes and paradigms, it is necessary to offer a brief *excursus* on utopia as a historical strand of thought, from which then meanings relevant

to our topic might be extracted.

Utopia emerged first as a literary form, officially initiated by Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), and continued in countless literary products, from William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1892) to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), all the way to the more politically ambiguous, post-scarcity science fiction of contemporary authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Cory Doctorow and Margaret Atwood. It is not overly relevant to our topic, however, to over-emphasise the literary acception of the term, in spite of it being chronologically the earliest, and the main one from which all others sprung up by extension and association: this because, in a more conteporary context, utopia has become a sort of overarching paradigm, which has constructed a life of its own, very often far from its literary origins in both context and channels of diffusion (Braungart, 2005).

More relevant to our topic is the larger, complex issue of the rhetorical charge that 'utopia' as a cultural paradigm entails. On one hand, we understand utopia as a condition where a certain ideology or worldview is entirely fulfilled, leading to the satisfaction of a desire of some sort – desire for a life that is better / safer / fairer / fuller / etc. (Levitas, 1990); on the other, a chimera of the mind detached from reality, which can be envisioned but hardly realised – essentially, an implicit judgement on the possibility itself for utopia to be realised. From this basic ambiguity built within the very semantic meaning of utopia, can be construed many basic parallels / opposition couples that roughly constitute, when considered in their globality and interconnectedness, the utopian vision: reality / fantasy; collectivism / individualism; action / inaction. All of these, and more, constitute and define utopia.

The coexistance of these semantic oppositions that, as a collectivity, define contemporary utopia, has of course its consequences. Throughout the twentieth, and early twenty-first century, different understandings of utopia have emerged: construed according to emphasize one aspect over others; spread over a wide-ranging ethical spectrum, spanning readings of utopia as a privileged space for positive intervention and socio-cultural change; or as heavy criticism of utopian thinking as pernicious, if not parasitic to meaningful human improvement.

Contemporary utopia is better understood by providing a few key examples. Starting from a literary terrain J. Wilson, as he criticises the dismissal of the utopian mindset as a 'popular misapprehension' (Wilson, 1971: 51), draws an ethical line between what he dubs Utopian Fantasies, escapist fables designed to compensate the lacks of the real world, and Social Criticism Utopia, which instead seeks to proactively raise thought and action against

those lacks (Wilson, 1971). A host of material has been produced around the issue of utopian thinking and utopian action within Marxism and, more generally, socialism, often underlining the complex embracing and rejection of utopia within such ideologies: Sciabarra, for example, in his *Marx, Hayek and Utopia*, states that the father of Socialism regarded utopians as 'aiming to create new social formations based upon a pretence of knowledge', and adopted throughout his work a 'profoundly anti-utopian mode of inquiry' (Sciabarra, 1995).

More recently and in light of a more positive reading of utopia, Hakim Bey configures the possibility of an anarchist utopia as he describes his Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey, 1991); Frederik Jameson has been widely discussed as a figure leading the critical utopia implicit in the thinking of the Frankfurt school toward new developments which value utopia at least as a theoretical alternative to the fragmentation of reality and agencies brought along by late capitalism (Jameson, 2004); David Harvey, in his influential book *Spaces of Hope*, describes the contingency of re-evaluated socialist / utopian ideas with regard to the spread of late capitalism-fuelled globalisation (Harvey, 2000).

Yet, some writers have identified as typical of the postmodern condition new types of utopia, ones that deny the possibility of changing reality on a macro level, and instead retract into more circumscribed, therefore more easily manipulated realms, be them actual or fictional (Kumar, 2005). In some instances, as pointed out by Levitas (Levitas, 1993), there is a tendency toward utopias that do not configure an unified, wide-ranging plan of action that can be set in motion to move us toward an ideal society; rather, many fragmented, insular alternatives of the mind, 'glimpses of a utopia which is unattainable'; explosive action and agency are substituted with intellectual speculation and appeals to our sense of wonder. Somewhere in between there has been, especially within strands of contemporary 'oppositional' artistic practices such as Institutional Critique and Relational Aesthetics (Fraser, 2005; Bourriaud, 1995; English, 2007), a return toward proactivity and engagement with the intent to move reality towards utopia, but on a different scale; instead of aiming for sweeping, revolutionary changes of society at all levels, these practices seek instead to create temporally and geographically circumscribed 'alternative spaces' where utopian elements can be reintroduced, if only for the duration of a gathering or exhibit – 'microtopias' (Bishop, 2006). This last strand of utopian thinking, the microtopia, has become (perhaps due to its popularity in contemporary art practices) the dominant model of utopian thinking for the contemporary museum.

The Museum as Utopia

The public museum, as in institutionally sanctioned agent and instrument of societal change, since its inception has been deeply entangled in the logics of utopia: from the birth of the 'proto-museum' of the Renaissance, essentially an effort to construct a thorough artificial reality that could reproduce, and therefore compete with, the perfection of the natural world (Findlen, 1989); through its evolution as a donation to the public by powerful men, ideally benefitting the former by their cultural and social amelioration, as well as the latter by further legitimisation of status and power (Pierce in Carrier, 2006); to the modern (or modernist) art museum as a place for the legitimisation of canons and acceptable cultural terms, as exemplified by Carol Duncan's, or Brandon Taylor's analysis of MoMA's semiotics of architecture and display history (Taylor, 1999; Duncan, 1993); the museum, and perhaps even more so the art museum has always been implicated in an exercise of public cultural amelioration that, upon close analysis, bears the hallmarks of an utopia-informed endeavour, often times a locally or temporally circumscribed microtopia.

The utopian instinct within the museum seems to be so pervasive, transversal and radicated, it has easily survived even the museum itself undergoing a paradigm shift of sorts in the second half of the past century: the transition from the museum as an instrument to uphold the artwork as a Modernist 'masterpiece', with all the cultural /social / political baggage it entails, to a competing ideology of the museum as a *locus* for an experience built around the visitor, rather than the work displayed. Playing a central role in this overarching shift (that did not entail a displacement of the paradigm of utopia to the slightest) are two of the 'buzzwords' that characterised the cultural climate museums inhabited starting in the late 1960s: Postmodernism; and education (Mayer, 2005: 356).

The birth, development and eventual obsolescence of Postmodernism has been chronicled time after time in a myriad of more or less celebrated publications; it seems therefore redundant to retrace its steps at large in this context. What would be useful, on the other hand, is to briefly rehearse the discussion of postmodern 'intertextuality' that Mayer presents us, arching back to Barthes. According to her, 'intertextuality' is the crux of a shift, within museal practices, from an artwork-oriented approach, to a viewer- oriented one: the 'text', the *locus* where the meaningfulness of an exchange of information lies, is no longer the 'radiant' work of art presented to the visitor, but rather the (not always) critical understanding and interpretation of the work by each visitor's point of view, not to mention an incorporation into daily life of the new knowledge provided by the meting of visitor and artwork (Mayer,

2005: 357-358). This reversal of focus, when conjugated with new practices and policies that better and more holistically connect visitor and museum should, at least in theory, produce a 'new museum', a place no longer 'hostile to the achievement of its own purpose' (Goodman, 1985).

I believe, however, that it is fundamental to recognise how the so far described paradigm shift has, in fact, done very little to displace the powerful drive toward utopia that is ingrained in the museum not only as a socio-politcal institution, but more generally as a veritable way of seeing the world. By moving from the Modernist absolute position of the artwork, to the Postmodern relative position of the visitor, a switch from utopia proper to microtopias, from utopian master narratives to instances of utopian prefiguration, has occurred. Most analysis tend, however, to gloss over or deny the inherent danger that a microtopia might be, even when disguised under the more friendly trappings of a non-ideology, still an utopia; and it still expresses a desire for social control, engineered amelioration and fantasy world-making; only on a smaller, perhaps less threatening hegemonic scale. When Bourriaud states that the micro-utopia is 'a utopia without teleology, without grand speeches, one that refers to everyday life' (Bourriaud, 1995: 34), or Johansson tells us that 'the focus... is about "little stories" rather than the so-called "grand narratives" of Modernist ideology' (Johannson, 2006: n/p), they implicitly disguise half the story: that these new narratives are still hegemonic in intention, if not scope; and they are not the sole precinct of visionary artists, but institutions and cultural agents alike. This has not changed, but rather it has been radicalised by the advent of the World Wide Web.

The Utopian Internet, and 'Web 2.0'.

From its early inception as a tool for limited communication between research institutions, to its current global reach (Leiner et al, 1999), the Internet's history and development are deeply entwined with utopian ideas of social amelioration and alternative world-making. This rhetoric of the Web as a place for generation of a 'new world order', be it hegemonic or 'underground', continues and intensifies as the Internet completes its last steps from a bottom-down system of content delivery, toward a far more complex and layered paradigm in which the 'audience' is no longer a passive fruitor, but rather it socially and actively shapes the content and, more important, the structure of the Internet itself. Recent iterations of the Internet have become social platforms ripe for experiments in cultural engineeringand education, from Flickr Commons to 'games with a purpose', and it seems that many instances

of museal online Web presences aim to take full advantage of this rubric.

In 2005 Web entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly illustrated, in his article 'What is Web 2.0', a gamut of Internet trends that he saw as defining a new iteration of the World Wide Web (O'Reilly, 2005). Rather than by definition, Web 2.0 is better described by the meme map provided in the article: from it, we can extrapolate that Web 2.0 consists of:

- A platform structure.
- 'Play'
- 'Emergent': user behaviour not predetermined.
- Hackability
- Rich user experience
- Web as components
- 'Trust your users'

Richard MacManus of ZDweb pools a few more 'definitions floating around' (MacManus, 2005): Web 2.0 is 'the underlying philosophy of relinquishing control' of Web technology, architecture and content to the user; 'glocalization', the ability to 'generate information in a locally meaningful fashion that is locally accessible'; 'giving up control and setting the data free' (Merholz, 2005; Boyd, 2005; DeWitt, 2005; MacManus, 2005). Hand in hand with Web 2.0 comes a paradigm that has been dubbed the 'social Web': hinging heavily upon new technologies and platforms for social Web interaction and content sharing such as blogs, 'like' and 'share' buttons, RSS feeds and social networks, the Internet becomes a *locus* for real-time, dynamic social interaction as much as economic and cultural exchange; people who navigate the Web can form permanent identities, and construct relationships that resemble their offline ones. Information also tends to travel along horizontal axes (peer-to-peer), going 'viral' and spreading in a user-fostered, 'meme' like fashion.

Beyond its dubious nature as a marketing ploy, rather than an effective way of describing the reality of a 'new Web' (Scott, 2007; Berners Lee, 2007), the Web 2.0 paradigm has come under close scrutiny for the utopian vision it proposes of the Internet as a promised land of intellectual, social, cultural and sometimes physical freedom through avatars. At the eve of Web 2.0, Richard Coyne, in his seminal 1999 book *Technoromanticism,* lays down a cogent critique of the 'digital utopia': he lets us know that 'many digital narrative are unabashedly utopian' (Coyne, 1999:21): that is to say, he diagnoses within them the general characters of the worst kinds of utopia: they are one-dimensional, as they rarely engage into a

critical appraisal of its own nature; and they always postpone into the future the breakthrough that will finally realise whichever utopian imaginary has been conceived. In this sense, 'many digital narratives are utopian... they give credence to information technology as a means of realizing the Enlightenment project of a world where reason holds sway over unreason... people are free, equal and in harmony.' (Coyne, 1999:26)

Along with Coyne, and among many others, Corey Doctorow reminds us of the peril of expecting participation, democracy and Enlightenment to spring out off a technological platform: 'in meta-utopia everyone engaged... carefully weighs the stuff in the balance and accurately defines the stuff's properties, noting those results. Simple observation demonstrates the fallacy of this assumption' (Dcotorow, 2001: n/p). According to him, the online utopia that Web 2.0 allegedly fosters requires a uniformity of vocabulary, aims, commitment and goals among users that simply is not there. Technology writer Nicholas Carr compares the Web 2.0 craze to a New Age movement, its proselytizers 'seeing the Web in religious terms' (Carr, 2005: n/p).

In spite of the mistrusts of many toward Web 2.0's promises of alleged participation, cultural equality and 'power back to the people', cursory analysis of the most well known aggregators for professional museum knowledge (i.e. ICHIM, or the Museum and the Web yearly conference) suggest that the museum as an institution has put sizeable stock on the participatory Web's promises of true interaction between the user and institutions, and among users themselves: trade papers are ripe with references to folksonomies; crowdsourcing; online content constructed by the audience and for the audience. This should, of course, come as no surprise if we consider the aforementioned cultural mandate of the museum, and the ways in which such mandate legitimises the existence of the institution itself: the museum is always on the lookout for arenas in which to develop new tools for ameliorating its publics, exercising its role of social improver of the masses by exposing them to its collections, events, and various repositories of knowledge. In this sense the Web, especially in its apparently democratic, free and friendly version that is Web 2.0, is an ideal avenue for increasing outreach.

The result is, I would argue, the creation within museum's public Web policies of a rhetoric that exposes the promise of freedom and inclusion of Web 2.0, while seeking to retain the museum's own primacy as an institution, an authority, and a repository of knowledge. To corroborate this statement, I will now look closely at a interesting example of an understudied segment of museum policy writing: a media strategy document. Situated

halfway between internal directives and public 'manifestos', these programmatic documents offer themselves open for close analysis of ambiguities, rhetorics and paradigms. The case chosen, 'Tate Online Strategy 2010-2012', has been selected for its timeliness, depth and widespread dissemination (*Tate Papers* and *Museum and the Web* among others.) It is, of course, one among many, and its analysis should serve mostly to provide corroboration to my hypothesis and pointers for future, deeper research.

'Tate Online Strategy 2010-2012'

As part of the "Tate Vision" project, an overarching rehash of Tate as an institution and a brand scheduled for 2015, a Web redevelopment strategy has been envisioned, and published as a freely available document under the name "Tate Online Strategy 2010-2012" (Stack, 2010). In a nutshell, Tate's strategy essentially aims at redesigning the Web identity of Tate Online from the ground up, rehauling the entirety of its media assets and overarching digital philosophy. All this falls within a wider rethinking of the ways in which Tate approaches and caters to that valuable pool of visitors that is its Web audience: 'Tate Online aims to help fulfil Tate's mission... Tate Online is uniquely placed to reach new audiences and engage them in new ways' (Stack, 2010: n/p).

The text can be roughly subdivided in three sections. First, Tate Online sets out is programmatic goals of redefining its function, context and brand on the Web: to this end, it configures a series of ten 'principles for Tate Online'. In the second section, the vision for a new Tate Online is contextualised within what is described as 'The new Web': 'The emergence of the social Web has transformed once passive consumers into authors, editors, feature writers, columnists, photo journalists, TV moguls and publishers' (Stack, 2010: n/p). Special emphasis is put on the new brand role that the Tate Online name would have within this new Web. Finally, the third section outlines in detail the specifics of Tate Online's rehaul, including website redesign, learning and scholarship, and content reorganisation.

Central to Tate Online's rationale for the overhaul is the perception that the museum's current modes of content pooling and delivery cannot keep up with the ever-evolving context of the Web and the increasing demands of its digital public. Their fear is, even two years later, within reason: in October 2012, nearing the end of Tate Online's time frame for its programmatic redesign, in spite of improvements since 2010 the website still remains – from a 'new Web', which is to say Web 2.0 point of view – very much a work in progress: content is almost entirely geared toward advertising and display of Tate's 'real world' gallery events;

interactive content, such as apps and blogs, are visually subordinate to purely informational content; little improvement has been made toward integrating Tate Online with other social media platforms.

While Tate Online's overhaul, then, might have been (or might be) long overdue, what are its paradigmatic coordinates? Which is to say, to what paradigms does it ascribe to? I believe a close reading of the basic overarching ideas, and language employed throughout the strategy might enlighten the redesign of Tate Online as deeply indebted to the idea of Web 2.0 as a culturally utopian (or rather, since the scope is limited to Tate Online's activities, 'microtopian') space.

Some of the key characteristics of the new Tate Online, according to the strategy document: the new web presence will be 'alive with thoughts, conversation and opinion', enable 'a range of possible user journeys', have 'open and shared' content and will be 'sustainable', both developmentally and ecologically (Stack, 2010: n/p). In the language deployed there is an abundance of 'organic' terms, so to speak: the vision for a new, Web 2.0 Tate Online is humanised by constant reference to the living metaphor: not only, as mentioned, the site will be 'alive' and filled with thought and conversation, as if it were a sort of neural node (and one should consider the often touted metaphor of Web 2.0 as a brain-like, intelligent system (O'Reilly, 2005)); further, references to the website as having a 'heart', and a geographic body that can be journeyed through, abound. These are of course metaphors, which should not be stretched too far by way of analysis; still, the tangible, organic, eminently non- virtual language deployed not only seeks to give the envisioned website a parvence of life, but also resonates with ideas of the Web as a living, breathing collective intelligence that informs much of the Web 2.0 philosophy.

Where the consonance between the revised Tate Online, and the utopia of Web 2.0 can tangibly be seen, is in the envisioned construction of a socially and culturally utopian space for Tate's users that the document's statements configure:

- 'Tate Online will be ideas-led and diverse through a proliferation of opinions, including multiple voices on the same subject, exchanging views'
- 'The strategy for Tate Media aims to create a platform for participation through the user comments and the nurturing of online communities'
- 'We must transparently interact with an audience... and the result will be an engaged audience with whom we will have a deep relationship' (Stack, 2010: n/p).

Each of these exemplary statements heavily echoes the rhetoric of, respectively, democratisation of participation; amelioration of audiences through a less hierarchical Web based communication; transparency, openness and sharing at all levels; that is ingrained in Web 2.0, and that has made this paradigm so successful among those that seek in the digital a liberation from cultural hierarchies, control over information, and intellectual subordination to established expertises.

By adhering to the dictates of Web 2.0, Tate Online will become 'more porous', a 'deep, rich experience' that will 'driv[e] visitors to explore further and deeper into the collection online' (Stack, 2010: n/p): the museum will therefore find public participation in its mandate for social and cultural engineering, a direct digital translation of the overarching goal it already works toward in the context of the physical gallery. The difficulty, however, in realising such lofty utopia can be read in the partial, incomplete success of Tate Online to fulfil its goals in 2012, as well as the pernicious persistance of unresolved problems that the document itself acknowledges – among them, the problem of how to differentiate expertise and 'institutional' voice from 'public voices, as the museum can hardly do away with its authority even in a digitally democratic context; innumerable issues of copyright; the underlying (and, if we are to agree with Doctorow and others, incorrect) assumption that inclusion and calls for participation will automatically kickstart a virtuous circle of sharing and lively debate (Kellogg Smith, 2006).

Conclusion

In spite of a slow progress in actually deploying its own mandates, Tate Online's web page shows (and along with it many other online museum presences) that change steeped into realistic, pragmatic attitudes toward the institution, the public and the Web's own ontology can lead to improved platforms for the dissemination of museal material and expertise. The dangers, however, are many and, counter to the widespread concepts of the Web as a radically new space, tend to reflect the philosophical issues that museums always had to wrestle with since their very inception: balancing the institution and the audience's voices, while upholding the museum's mandate as preserver of heritage, as well as educator; tireless and expensive work to develop and disseminate authoritative information in a context where, almost without exception, one size does not fit all; and the need to remain current and relevant, without recurring to flimsy paradigms and technocratic optimism, a hundred years ago as much as today.

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