

40th ANNUAL ICOFOM SYMPOSIUM

Havana, Cuba, 25-29 September, 2017

The politics and poetics of museology

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

as prelude to presentation and/or publication in the ICOFOM Study Series 46

Submission of abstracts: March 15, 2017

Submission of full papers: August 31, 2017

Abstracts for presentations and/or papers

The abstracts for presentations and/or papers (300 words maximum) and the main references (10 references maximum) will be accepted until 15 March 2017 (inclusive) and should be submitted via [this online form](#).

If you have any questions you can address them to icofomsymposium@gmail.com

The organizing committee is responsible for:

- Receiving the abstracts and acknowledging their receipt before 20 March 2017,
- Respecting the "double blind" requirement of review,
- Transmitting the abstracts anonymously to the symposium selection committee which will proceed with the evaluation of all abstracts,

Notifying the authors about to the decision of the selection committee before April 20, 2017.

Call for Abstracts

The politics and poetics of Museology

It has become rather banal to speak of the museum as a place of power. Whether one refers to it as media (Davallon, 1992), as medium (McLuhan, Parker & Barzun, 1969), or as device (Bennett, 1995), we must understand that this institution, emblematic of occidental civilization, has always aroused the interests of local political régimes, whatever they may be. The creation of the British Museum and the birth of the Louvre (Déotte, 1994; Pommier, 1995) illustrate the many different ways the public has of seeing the links between knowledge and collections. Furthermore the advent of each new political régime (from democracy in America to the Marxist-Leninist system in the Soviet Union, passing by fascist Italy and national-socialist Germany) marks museums with its imprint, as well as its system of communication, preservation and research.

Politics is always integral to the functioning of museums, affecting both directly and indirectly the neutral and objective image that this institution presents to the public. We muse on the direct influence of a local politician, who tries to force an artist upon a curator, or impose a political régime looking to transform a national narrative (Bergeron, 2014). But we can also question the indirect political influence on the biases of museum professionals and theoreticians, across museology and its different modes of communication: articles, books, conferences, symposia and teaching institutions.

The idea is not new. We find it in the first ICOFOM debates, especially in the division of participants (essentially Anglophone) who considered museology to be essentially practical and pragmatic as opposed to those who saw museology as a scientific (empirical, rational) discipline (Burcaw, 1981). In the 1980s the debate was certainly not settled. The bipolar world of the time differed considerably from that of today. At that time questioning the nature of disciplines was based on university structures different from what we know now. From a certain point of view, Zbyněk Stránský's reasons for presenting museology as science can only be understood within this somewhat dated context. The more recent interpretations by Bruno Latour (2001), analyzing science as a process in which ideas are added within controversies, has permitted a richer vision, especially for the topic considered here. From this perspective, it is not simply a matter of developing concepts or a new vocabulary, but rather of creating new resources and laboratories of political alliances: in short, developing strategies in which the scientific arguments are just one aspect.

Following this analysis, the question of power referenced above is dominant. Whether seen as scientific or theoretic, museology (or museum studies) as a discipline should be considered to be sufficiently coherent and valuable (in results and the establishment of research capital) to merit development within the academic system. Museology should also be useful beyond the university, as much as museology claims to influence museums and the manner in which they are organized. If research-based museology can influence the world-wide teaching of museology, it seems positive (there have never been so many

schools and researchers). But we have to question on one hand the type of museology being taught, and on the other hand the real influence of museology, both on museums and on those who fund museums.

In this call for papers, we want to explore this question from three angles: politics, geopolitics and poetics.

The politics of museology

If we can pretend, along with Bourdieu, that sociology is a combat sport (Carles 2001), then what is museology? The question posed by Cameron (1971) as to whether a museum is a temple or a forum, can also be asked of museology and the padded environments in which it evolved, most often the university and a few big museums. This question hides museology's lack of influence in these debates in a significant manner. Almost any museum textbook (Gob & Drouguet, 2014; Ambrose & Paine, 2012; Zubiaur, 2004) tends to show the great distance between the stated role of a museum - historic preservation, research, training and education, and a social role - and the reasons why many establishments were actually created: as symbols of power and instruments of propaganda to the glory of a patron or a region, or as urban economic and touristic development. If we can see global politics as the development of city affairs, then who really manages the business of the museum (or the museum field)? What could be the role of museology from this perspective: to keep a prescriptive interpretation of what should be the role of the museum, risking a more and more useless point of view? Should museology seek to define, or should it seek to convince and influence? Should we mainly address our own students and colleagues, colleagues in other disciplines, and museum professionals, or should we endeavour to influence politicians? If, theoretically, all seems possible, most researchers need to make practical choices, but which ones? Should museology, from this perspective, be militant (as is new museology)? And if so, for whom - colleagues, professionals, the public or people of influence? From this point of view, how to manage the offset between, on the one hand, classical prescriptive museology (conservation, research, communication in a research-based framework) and, on the other hand, the precarious situation faced by many museums including the need to cover the rent, develop tourism and support social inclusion?

The geopolitics of museology

The history of museology, as well as that of museums, shows a considerable evolution of the museum landscape as well as the methods used in museum work. If all members of ICOM see themselves (more or less) in the definition of museum and the code of ethics, most of them could not understand the broad heterogeneity in the ways of thinking about museums today. We can, however, identify a certain number of zones of influence more or less important in the world that are linked to specific trains of thought: a few celebrated universities (Leicester University); a few big museums (the Louvre or the Metropolitan); or certain important authors (Stephen Weil, John Falk, Tony Bennett, Georges Henri Rivière, Hugues de Varine, Roland Arpin, Filipe Lacouture etc.); a consulting organization (Lord Cultural Resources). How to determine and distinguish these zones? Should we

speak of museological imperialism (Scheiner, 2016) to recognize certain dominant forms: Anglo-Saxon and to a lesser extent Francophone and Hispanic? How, from this perspective, can we find other ways of conceiving of the museum field, from Oceania, Africa, the Middle East, Asia or the far North?

So, from this point of view, the origin of most of the big museum concepts, as well as the museums themselves, is occidental. The evolution of the world suggests considerable political and economic changes in the decades to come, presaging more or less radical transformations in global geopolitical activities. It would be difficult to believe that these changes would not affect museums and museology. How will notions, such as heritage, conservation, the inalienable nature of collections, or the relationship of museums to profit evolve, if a number of countries have conceptions that are, at times, diametrically opposed to those dominant today, especially concerning the materiality of heritage as well as its authenticity and access?

The poetics of museology

If we can risk defining poetics as the theory and analysis of artistic creation (notably literature), we must decide that there exists a poetics of museology (the art of exposition) as shown by numerous authors, such as Altshuler (2013) or Karp and Lavine (1991). But can one really speak of a poetics of museology? Without doubt we could analyze the museological discourse according to its aesthetic or ornamental dimensions, but most contributors privilege a methodical rhetoric in which most of the time sobriety leaves little room for poetics.

Alternatively we can posit a hypothesis that what creates the originality and pertinence of the great museum thinkers is at the heart of a creative process in which the concepts as much as the ways of evoking them contribute greatly to the quality of the message by inscribing in them certain poetics of museology. The lyricism in Duncan Cameron's (1992) foundational articles contribute greatly to their notoriety, and the same goes for the energy evident in the contributions of Hugues de Varine and of the numerous authors of new museology (Desvallées, 1992-1994). Humour as well as John Cotton Dana's style is a non-negotiable aspect of his iconoclastic work. Can we find in museum literature an admirable creative breath among the great museum thinkers today, or are we doomed to gloomy and technocratic gibberish? From this perspective, can we find a poetics of museology and who would be the creators who propose new concepts and notions in synchronicity with our society?

François Mairesse, December 2016

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