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Museums in/of the age of migrations. Trends and forms of a new museographical vision

Abstract

Migrations, multiplicity and hybridisation are the three key concepts that inform the “forward look” that is here proposed for the last session of the Conference “Re-Visiting the Contact Zone: Museums, Theory, Practice”. The topics are related to the Research “Museums and Libraries in/of the Age of Migrations” Granted by 7FP EU Programme, Luca Basso Peressut Project Coordinator (www.mela-project.eu).

1. Migrations

The reinterpretation of the European cultural heritage in the 21st century is a key issue for museums in terms of interpretation, amongst a renewed communication system of knowledge, specifically concerning different modes of functioning and use by societies and individuals in the age of migrations in a globalized world.

The result of processes of people migrations are unexpected melting-pots and hybridations that change the form of the world we live in, “re-morphing” the geographical frontiers of states and nations, but also all the conceptual boundaries we are involved in (as Homi Bhabha has stated: “The ‘place’ of the national culture is not unitary and cohesive, nor can it be considered simply as ‘different’ with respect to what is beyond or outside it: the border has two sides, and the problem of interior/exterior is transformed in a process of continuous hybridation”). The dynamics of today’s multiethnic/multicultural Europe asks for a shift from a national identity formation to the imperatives of today’s complex body of communities, rewriting the great national narratives to a more articulated transnational and transcultural scenario based on a multiplicity of voices and subjects involved in the organization, design and use of cultural institutions.

Actually the question of migrations is not only concerned with peoples, but is a more complex condition of contemporary society. Migration have become a significant key term for thinking through planetary processes that not only reveal the global economic order of labour, but also the deep refashioning of the cultural and political spheres under the impact of the accelerated mobility of goods, bodies, ideas and institutions.

Looking at cultural institutions we can recognize some acknowledged assumptions:

- Not only migration(s) of peoples, but also migration(s) of individuals: “nomadism” for work, study, research or tourism (here we can refer to Martin Heidegger’s philosophical concept of *Unheimlichkeit*, disorientation, “not feeling like at one’s home”, as the true existential condition of *Sein*, i.e. “being” in contemporary life. In this vision, “being” means more and more “being in the world”, in a condition of agitated and nomadic mobility and travel among different places and with different purposes).
- Migration(s)/Disappearing of culture(s): e.g. intangible culture(s) and heritage. This is a key question for future engagements of museums in forms of preserving, enhancing and transmitting weak expressions of common heritage: words, talks, experiences, all definable as “intangible”.
- Migration(s) of things: objects, relics, works of art: e.g. for temporary exhibitions. A question that affects the role, the organization and the form of museums and exhibitions.
- Migration(s) of knowledge and information. Into the global space of information and communication (the network society envisioned by Manuel Castell), also in museums there are, using Martin Prösler’s words, “perpetual streams of information, images and knowledge [that] generate relations of intensified exchange [we may say cultural exchange] on a world-wide scale”.

2. Multiplicity

In museums field this means a multiplicity of new stories to be told, new topics that are part of our multilayered and globalized societies. Themes concerning the products of the consumerism of the industrial age (design, movies, cars, fashion, etc.). Topics that are sometimes hot, contested or difficult (see Cameron/Kelly and Macdonald): racism, violence, atrocity, terrorism, war...

This also means that the strategies of creation, curatorship and design of new museums and exhibitions need a more complex approach that is fostered by a multiple approach by disciplines and points of view. This condition has broken the unity of the narratives of the dominant and authoritative culture of the traditional "exhibitionary complex" (Bennett), letting museums become self determined in searching multiple and fragmentary story-telling strategies; arenas of experiences practices in continuous transformation with multiple experiences and audiences.

Showing a more open attitude towards the other histories and cultures, which have the same rights to be represented in places serving this purpose, museums (using their specific tools) must discover the need to rewrite their role and communication strategies and techniques. This re-writing must be capable of programmatically renouncing the opposition of differences, and be inclusive rather than segregative, cutting the dominant culture down to size and rendering the subjects homogeneous with respect to one another, recognizing themselves -as Lynn Szwaja has said- "as arenas of discourse and negotiation in defining new forms of public culture".

Museums have been reconsidered in the last twenty years as public venues for collaboration, shared control and complex cultural translation; places of power turned into places of cultural integration; places of complex hybrid multi-cultural representation of identity (different layers of identity, or different identities); places of knowledge; places of conservation but also places of meeting and mutual understanding on the free ground of cultural research.

As Fredi Drugman wrote nearly fifteen years ago: "How can the visit to a museum or to an exhibition be transformed into a real journey into the other-than-self? What tips can an organizer and an exhibition designer draw from their own experience to make what they show talk to the visitor? How does a user fit with his/her culture? And what happens to the culture of a minority when it becomes part of the hegemonic cultural politics of an important museum? What is the relationship between the 'universalistic vocation' and the contextual character of what we call, almost never agreeing on the definition, cultural heritage?"

Today's museum system is articulated, multifaceted, a real mirror of contemporary societies: we have great national historical museums, traditional art museums but also different kinds of contemporary art museums, scientific museums of ancient foundation and very new and experimental science centres; there are thematic or monographic museums, museums of community, religious or ethnic, museums in and about territory, ecomuseums, and so on. Museum today stops being a *local phenomenon* and becomes a *world-wide phenomenon*, with related cultural criss-crossing and interferences with other cultural institutions and activities.

At the same time, the concept of museum as a collective place has become increasingly consolidated in a context, like the current one, where the museum forms an articulated dimension of social leisure and enjoyment, no more "reformatory of manners" or place of "civilizing rituals". It's in evidence that museum's values have shifted from moral lessons to entertainment (already in 1987, Frank Werner, talking about the first museum boom in Germany, wrote of: "sixty million leisure-hungry visitors, kitted out with gym-shoes that assail the museums of the German Federal Republic every year in search of recreation amidst artistic and architectural scenery of increasing refinement").

Multilayered society has also shattered the concept of public, but also, that of "publics", as we use to say today. In museums today we have only *visitors*, single personalities one different from the other with their own identities and interests, aesthetic dimension and cognitive dimension in interpreting museum exhibitions, picking up what they want as it happens in choosing books when they are in

libraries. This inevitably reflects in the concept, design and organization of museum displays. As Nicholas Serota has claimed: “In making exhibitions we can only expect to create a matrix of changing relationships to be explored by visitors according to their particular interests and sensibilities”.

3. Hybridisation

Starting from the (almost 30 years old) assertion by Kenneth Hudson, that “the nature of museum work must be continually questioned”, and according to the reflections by Elain Gurian -when she says that “in 25 years, museums will no longer be recognizable as they are now known. Many will have incorporated attributes associated with organizations that now are quite distinct from museums”-, we must recognize that hybridisation is a trend characterizing (among others) the cultural institutions in terms of organization, offers to the visitors, forms of spaces and architecture .

In an age of consumerism and imagery, whose life space is increasingly less real and more and more imagined, increasingly less steady and more transitory, unreal and represented, replace the concrete way for things to be, overcoming the traditional concepts of “museums” and “exhibitions”, related to the materialities of objects and spaces. In such conditions, museums (as laboratories of experiencing) are more and more similar to a staged space or a performing set. We are faced with a peculiar aesthetics of space, the aesthetic of the temporary, of media, advertising and spectacle: generally speaking, the aesthetics of communication, of evocation and *mythopoiesis*. Often the architectural “ensemble” (the whole stage of architectural space) encompasses and overlaps the singular (the object on display), creating more emotional and empathic experiences than real knowledge (Jean Nouvel talking of his Musée du Quai Branly in Paris: “everything is done to stimulate the blossoming of emotions aroused by the primary object [...]. It is a place marked by symbols of forests and rivers, by obsessions with death and oblivion...”).

Changing values in museums demand “new ways of thinking about collections and audiences, and new ways of integrating the two” (Hooper-Greenhill). This means new displays and exhibition settings, i.e. design of communications strategies. This also means continuous changes in the interior spaces of museums, according to changing strategies of heritage interpretation and museums’ philosophies with the changing cultural climate and *Zeitgeist* (Paul Chemetov in 1994 said that his arrangement of the Grande Galerie de l’Evolution was supposed to last for not more than ten years, even though it still stands, with few and small changes).

What we are witnessing (in the field of museography, temporary exhibitions, but also of fairs and retail), is a rethinking of the exhibition systems, the *architecture of display*, on the basis of a narrativity capable to transmit messages not only through collections of objects on show, but also through suitable media structures, while new technologies convey the complexity of the transmitted discourse.

Exhibitions are increasingly more complex artifices. It is no coincidence that today’s exhibitions bear the signs of multiple experiences that have successfully conveyed experimentation in the communication field and whose forms have become part of exhibition design practice through the use of “lateral aesthetics” such as video art, high-tech, virtual reality, etc. At the same time the concepts of the mutability of spaces and circularity of expositions play an ever greater part in the transformation of how these events are organized. As it have been stated, we can define this condition as a “post-object role” (Dilevko/Gottlieb) that affects not only museums but also libraries, kunsthallen, cultural centres, whose ways of relating to the visitors are becoming nearly identical (libraries offers exhibitions, some of them incorporate museums, the use of digital ITC is pervading museum and libraries), and that are also similar to those of other non-institutional venues such as bookshops, commercial malls, etc.

The contemporary “exhibitionary complex” is less and less definable along clear and separated typologies: today society’s multiculturalism is reflected by multifunctionalism of many of the new cultural institutions and by hybridization of functions and forms of spaces and architecture.

Many museums are organizing their spaces to enhance temporary exhibitions whose topics not always refer to the consolidated collections: in Brescia, an archaeological museum such as the Museo di Santa Giulia has recently hosted exhibitions devoted to impressionist art or to landscape paintings of 19th Century United States . Moreover, we know, physical fragmentation of exhibition spaces and architectures, scattered through cities, territories and nations is a trend going on in cultural foundations (let's think to Guggenheim's, or to SFO Museum scattered through San Francisco Airport premises). We can already foresee a near future structure of museums organized with one or more great repository, or warehouse, from where pick up from time to time objects for different exhibitions in different places and spaces or, as already happens for the Schaulager in Basel, downstairs in a multifunctional part of the same building.