MARTOR

Entrance Hall. Curatorial Statement

Curating Change in the Museum: Introduction to the Volume

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Museums, these quintessentially modern institutions, are built to last. Together with archives, they preserve the memory, embodied in objects, of a given community. The terminology used in museums clearly shows this drive towards permanence. Nothing more telling than the term "permanent exhibition" whose life-span in contemporary museums is shortening as we write, but continues to be used widely despite its obvious internal contradiction.

"So, when do you plan to change your permanent exhibition?" is the question commonly asked of museum curators, even when their "permanent exhibition" has just been opened to the public. This special issue of MARTOR journal seeks to offer different answers to this question, from diverse corners of the planet, from former Yugoslavia to Senegal, from Bucharest to Rome, diving not only into the "when" but equally into the "why" and "how" museums change.

Because they do change. Museums are places of conservation but they do not necessarily have to be conservative places. On the contrary, museums are sometimes at the vanguard of cultural innovation, changing the world rather than keeping up with the way the world changes. This thematic issue brings together texts and case-studies of museums challenging the status-quo, opening up instead of closing in, daring instead of being cautious, all the while keeping up the standards of preserving and exhibiting the precious collections in their care.

Change in museums can occur *in relation with* or *in spite of* changes in the context in which they function. First, there are socio-political changes in countries where museums are located—wars, revolutions, or transitions. Then, there are cultural transformations, changes in perceptions, which bring about iconoclastic moves and paradigm shifts. Yet, while some museums embrace the challenge of change present in their environment, others perdure in continuity, remaining bastions of the old, sometimes out of mere inertia, other times out of a stubbornness that is political to the bone. How do museums make sense of the changes around them? Second, there is the change in museum practices, including new ways of making and unmaking the museum, of relating to forms of representation, to communities. But how do we map this connection between change within museums and ruptures (or more subtle transformations) in their contexts? Change, therefore, with its multifaceted trajectories, conditions, and intersections, is the key focus of this volume.

The editorial team of the volume is a mixture of academics and practitioners, interested in observing, analysing and curating change in museums. Their first collaboration was part of the research project "Museums and Controversial Collections. Politics and Policies of Heritage-Making in Post-Colonial and Post-socialist Contexts."[1] It is in this framework, and in partnership with the Franco-British project "The Criminalization of Dictatorial Pasts in Europe and Latin America in Global Perspective,"[2] as well as the Francophone Regional Centre for Advanced Research in Social Sciences, University of Bucharest (CEREFREA) and Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Bureau Europe Centrale et

Orientale, that the editors of this volume convened in Bucharest the workshop "Reluctant heritage: Revisiting museums and memory sites in Central and Eastern Europe in a transnational perspective" (CEREFREA, 4-5 November 2016).

Owing to the diverse backgrounds of the editorial team, we have extended the curatorial thinking to the structure of the volume and thus present it to the reader as a curatorial project with three exhibition halls, study corners and, of course, the statement that you are currently reading. The voices of the authors are equally diverse: you will read not only what researchers think of museums, but will also hear curatorial thoughts (Nicolau; Chipangura; Hasnaș and Iordan), artists engaging with museums (Mesnil, Fouché) and even a conversation between visitors (Al-Qaisi).

The First Hall you enter, *Transitional museology*, exhibits and analyses museums reacting to social and political change. The term "transitional museology"[3] is a declination of the already established field that is transitional justice, defined as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses" (UN Approach to Transitional Justice 2010: 2). Sometimes musealisation is included among the practices of transitional justice[4]; yet, among museum curators and historians there is rarely an understanding of the fact that museum building and curatorial practices in transition periods might have distinct features, might face more difficult issues than museology in "normal" times.

We thus define transitional museology, as a specific type of museology born in times of transition from conflict and/or state repression in order to honour the victims and come to terms with a specific traumatic history. We argue that transitional museology not only chooses themes that had been previously silenced or uncomfortable, but in doing so it changes the way museums are seen and see themselves, from mere members of the choir of dominant discourse, to leading voices in their community.

As any pioneer work, the struggles of museums when faced with untrodden paths are not always success stories but rather trial-and-error narratives. We believe the value of these experiences to reside precisely in their exploratory nature.

The first contribution examines how museums

transform as the society in which they are embedded is in full process of radical change. Joel Palhegyi's analysis of history museums in Croatia in the first decades of socialism highlights ways in which museum professionals think through their work in an all-encompassing programme of social change occurring in idiosyncratic socialist Yugoslavia. While discussing the specificities of Croatia, the trends described relate to the broader transformations of socialist East European museography after 1945. Palhegyi discusses the emergence of "museums of revolution" which narrate the story of change with a direct didactic goal, but also of "native place museums" which circumscribe history to the clear progression to socialism. In investigating the ways museum professionals refocus their display away from "bourgeois" practice, he highlights the departures, ruptures, but also dynamic transformations of the repoliticized museum.

Beyond revolutions, among the ruptures and transitions we discuss, very important at the global scale are postcolonial transformations. As such, one of the most important challenges of contemporary museologies is the process of dealing with "postcolonial" politics (and epistemics) of change. Museums in former colonies and former colonizing countries, including ethnographic museums, are undergoing major changes. Drafting national and regional standards for the management of human remains collections[5]; renaming or closing ethnographic galleries; creating artistic and meta-museal projects aiming to reconstruct the violence of certain museum practices; imagining different "political, epistemic and artistic processes of return" (Bodenstein, Oțoiu, Troelenberg, forthcoming) and "repatriation" of artefacts or human remains; co-curating the museum and its archives and other forms of consultation and collaboration between museum professionals and what is usually called "descendant" or "source communities"; reconstructing the (often problematic) history of collection practices, and doing research into provenance—are all ways of managing, documenting, avoiding or challenging the colonial past in the museum institution. The museum is thus a political place *par excellence*, at the intersection between national policies (e.g., indigenous politics, recognizing rights for different communities and groups) and larger debates concerning the "decolonizing mission of the museum."

3) The concept of transitional museology has been presented by Simina Bădică at "The Society for Romanian Studies International Conference" (June 2015, Bucharest) and the "Kenneth Hudson International Seminar. Totalitarian regimes heritage and European narratives. Experiences and ideas on the role of museums" (November 2015, Bucharest).

4) "Reparations can include [...] building museums and memorials, and establishing days of commemoration" (UN Approach to Transitional Justice 2010: 8).

5) See, for instance, the project initiated by the Commonwealth Association of Museums, in collaboration with Iziko Museums of South Africa, the Museums Association of Namibia, and the National Museum of Botswana https://www.humanremains-insouthernafrica.org/.

It is precisely these debates that constitute the starting point of Charline Kopf's text on "Dakar's Museum of Black Civilisations: Towards a New Imaginary of a Post-ethnographic Museum." How does the director of the future Museum of Black Civilisations, which will open its doors at the end of this year, see a curatorial project that he considers to be "post-ethnographic?" How could this "post-ethnographic" approach make it possible to "provincialize" the colonial narrative (Chakrabarty 2000) and go beyond the debates on the restitution of African collections in so-called Western museums? Kopf reconstructs, in a very nuanced and convincing way, the paradoxes and ambiguities of the curatorial project which aims to be decolonial, while at times maintaining "binary, essentialised identities." The contribution also includes an examination of the architectural project funded via China's foreign aid programme and designed by the Beijing Institute of Architecture.

If Kopf is looking at the creation of a new museum, for Chipangura, curator at Mutare Museum in Zimbabwe, the central question is how to transform a colonial museum, bearing the political and epistemic imprint of "colonial relations" (de l'Estoile 2008). In trying to reconstruct "the biography of objects" (Kopytoff 1986) and include contextual elements in the museum presentation, Chipangura tells us about the museum team's efforts to overcome the colonial "exhibitionary complex" (Bennett 1995).

The text is also a glimpse into what might seem as another imperative of the contemporary "postcolonial museology"—that is, what Chipangura calls "shared authority in museum knowledge production," and the involvement of (and the collaborative partnership) with "source and descendant communities" (for a critical discussion of the concepts, see, for instance, Boast 2011; Golding and Modest 2013; von Oswald and Rodatus 2018).

The Study Corner exhibits the seminal experience of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in transitional museology. The Museum of the Romanian Peasant is especially suited to host such a debate in the pages of its journal of museology and visual anthropology as it has been itself a site of controversy and bold innovation. Recognized as such and awarded the European Museum of the Year Award in 1996, the museum has just finished major reconstruction works and

will reopen its doors with a contemporary version of the award-winning permanent exhibition imagined and produced by artist Horia Bernea during the 1990s.

The two texts presented in the study corner are explorations of the seminal concept of "the Antidote Museum, recommended during periods of cultural, social and political convalescence," developed in the early 1990s, by ethnologist, writer and museum curator Irina Nicolau. The text that introduces it, together with the "Decalogue of the Antidote Museum" is for the first time translated and published in English in this volume. Ethnologist Marianne Mesnil, friend and collaborator of Irina Nicolau, and artist Florian Fouché use the same dialogic form of Nicolau's article to discuss the fertile afterlife of the Antidote Museum.

The Second Hall seeks to explore the possibilities of the Antifragile Museum, according to the elaborate definition of antifragility provided by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2013). The antifragile, the "things that gain from disorder" might seem to be in natural opposition to the museum, which requires and produces order. The antifragile is not the robust, the solid, or the unchangeable as a response to adversity. Antifragility is the quality of those who benefit from adversity, who grow from challenges, who accept the unpredictable as a necessary and beneficial part of life.

We thus invite reflection on the antifragility of some of the museums discussed in this section. Cheryl Klimaszewski's subjects of interest, the "emergent museums," the private, sometimes highly personal museums, created by enthusiastic individuals would perhaps fit most easily into the antifragile category. Klimaszewski discusses "this new form in relation to the museum as a process of knowledge-making, one that is amplifying types of participation and inclusivity still not foregrounded within new museology." Sometimes described as "wild" or "unofficial," these private institutions might provide the fertile ground for innovation in twenty-first century museology. Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence in Istanbul was named European Museum of the Year in 2014 as recognition of an important shift in contemporary museology, a shift in which the "wild" and "emergent" might become the new "normal."

Resilience in time of change is the focus of Selma Harrington, Branka Dimitrijević, and Ashraf Salama's piece. They highlight the issue of
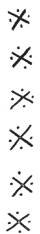
public history museums in what they describe as small, "peripheral" countries, which have been marked by major systemic transformations in the twentieth century, yet displayed resilience. Combining architectural analysis and public history, they focus on both the materiality and the historicity of museums and their collections. The contribution includes a tour de force in a global repertoire of architectural history of museums, showcasing the role of modernist architecture in hosting museum exhibits. Illustrating the resilience of modernist spaces, the authors discuss the versatility of Sarajevo's Museum of Revolution, which started as a space dedicated to the fight for radical change—echoing Palhegyi's article—but was challenged by another significant rupture—war, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and its conversion into a museum of history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Sarajevo case opens up fascinating questions about the relocation of collections in the aftermath of socio-political rupture, recovering from direct destruction and symbolic violence, about techniques of survival when going against the current, and, more, about the specificity in reconstituting a "public" museum of history when political preferences gravitated towards the "national."

Flaminia Bartolini's contribution discusses the challenges to display objects and narratives in spaces that have historical associations with a country's difficult past. By examining the conversion into a museum of Villa Torlonia, Mussolini's residence in Rome, Bartolini questions how "difficult heritage"—conceptual frame introduced by anthropologist Sharon Macdonald (2009) in her discussion of Nazi architecture in Germany—can be reused as museum space, and how it can play a role in the renegotiation of a problematic past. Placing it in a context of change in memory cultures—the political revisionism of the Italian New Right and the local Left's decision to open "monuments of fascism" to the public, she examines the potential to transform the site into a museum, but also the challenges of exhibiting in the space given the impact on visitors, indicative of the incomplete engagement with the difficult past.

In contrast, the *Museo della Fondazione della Shoah* in Rome represents a conscious attempt to intervene in the divided memory of Fascism and the obfuscation of Italy's difficult past, as Martin Van Gils shows in his analysis of the museum as a material and symbolic entity. In his analysis of two of the Museo's past exhibitions, Van Gils examines its discursive framing of Italy's role in the Holocaust, incorporating a multi-scalar analysis and drawing on the concept of "cosmopolitan memory." He examines the establishment of the museum as part of a transnational process of making museums concerned with the Shoah, and reflects on the frictions existing with the local and the national in enacting the museum concept. He analyses the interplay of scales in museum representations, discussing the challenges and opportunities a local institution faces in a dialogical relationship with transnational memorial discourses, in the context of travelling collections. Focusing on a museum process which engages with the adversity of local memory cultures, which grows from challenges, therefore echoing the antifragile museum, the article showcases the dialogue between museums and local, national and global discourses of remembrance.

The Third Hall gives voice to the characters directly involved in the museum processes: the curators and the visitors. Jasmina Al-Qaisi's dialogic visit to the Museum of Things in Berlin *(Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge)* is unpacking "an unusual educational institution that, using almost exclusively analogue methods, reaches remarkable levels of interactivity." Going twenty-five years back in time, Al-Qaisi's piece connects with another dialogue on museums and their usefulness, between Irina Nicolau and Dominique Belkis (English translation provided in the Study Corner). Irina Hasnaș Hubbard and Iulia Iordan share their experience and dilemmas as curators of an exhibition for children in a country where museums are not particularly welcoming for children. The shaping of the curatorial concept is retraced in their article, highlighting the obstacles and creative solutions found in trying to interact with children while also educating them about the fragility of museum artefacts, even (more) if these artefacts are old toys.

The volume includes a *visual essay* curated by Viviana Iacob (curator, Ethnological Archive, Museum of the Romanian Peasant). The image selection (*Visual Archaeologies*) captures the multiple ways in which changes are recorded in the documentary visual archives of heritage institutions, with the Museum of the Romanian Peasant as a case-study. The ethnographic archive

of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant is a multimedia repository replete with artefacts that document this institution's avatars for more than a century. In this sense, the archive does not only record the work carried out by the Museum of National Art, the Folk Art Museum, The History Museum of the Communist Party, or the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, that is, the "what," but also the "how," the technologies that made possible this work of documentation.

Some of the archive material is repetitive or syncopated (the same image in different media, the print without its original) and some counts as ideological recoveries (images that were collected with the purpose of being withheld from public consumption). Moreover, there are temporal discontinuities (images that are not dated or identified) creating a critical mass that resists archiving. The images selected for this essay reflect this archive's potency, rawness and ability to capture change in how we look at things, how we document them, and how we exhibit them.

As this volume seeks to show, change is a constant concern for museum professionals. Sometimes, reflections on the necessity and conditions of change become a priority and give birth to influential and relevant texts that outlive their creators and the situations in response to which they were created. Such a concept is the Antidote Museum (see *infra* 89), an offspring of the Romanian postcommunist transition, yet an inspiration for museum curators who believe change is on their daily to-do list.

The Antidote Museum (A. M.)
A user's manual

The A. M. is recommended during periods of cultural, social and political convalescence (times of transition).

The A. M. doesn't allow for one-size-fits-all solutions. It owes its success to its diversity and adaptability.
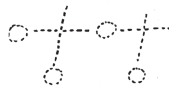
We don't go to the A. M. as we would go to church, to school, to court, to the hospital or the cemetery, but as we would go to the museum.

The A. M. is the museum of 'Look at this!' (…)

The A. M. unveils and hides at the same time.

(…)

After remission, the A. M. must be taken occasionally in order to prevent the B. M. syndrome (Blasé Museum).

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