

MUSEUMS OF THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE. PROPOSALS TO CAPITALISE ON LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCES¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

A pandemic like Covid-19 can launch a society into deep crisis, revealing its fragilities and weaknesses, questioning its points of reference and values, identifying errors in practices and laws and throwing its members into bewilderment and paralysis. According to the anthropologist Victor Turner (1982), in such a problematic context culture then becomes essential, as it can accompany an examination of the problems that may have led to the situation and, at the same time, provide, if not a hypothetical solution, at least adjustments and perhaps new ways to try to get through it.

Our contribution mainly refers to ethnographic, anthropological, local history, and world culture museums – both of us being authors engaged in the work developed here (one as a curator in a university ethnographic museum and the other as cultural critic of European world culture museums) – and it draws upon the observations of the Italian situation, in particular in northern Italy, one of the areas in Europe most affected by the pandemic, and where the two authors are based.

Moreover, we actually believe that ethnographic museums can be forerunners in experimenting with different initiatives in times of crisis as, in recent years, they have had to face their problematic heritage and question their role in society and have therefore necessarily developed a sensitivity to contemporary issues and to meeting the public – the response by UK museums, including Pitt Rivers', to #BlackLivesMatter (Gompertz 2020) is an emblematic case in this sense but not a coincidence – and these initiatives could hopefully become permanent good practices, and valid for all the other museums too.

2. TRADITIONAL AND NEW AUDIENCES

In the lockdown period due to Covid-19, which began in Italy with the decree of 8 March 2020, the total closure of any cultural activity at national level was not matched by a world of culture quarantine: on the contrary, since the beginning it has been possible to refer to online communication and interaction tools to find cultural resources of any kind, made available to everyone, and mostly free.

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In this flow of information, museums have been among the most tireless promoters of stimuli and possibilities. Since the first signs in northern Italy at the end of February in the form of their closures and re-openings in fits and starts, many museums have immediately tried to react, not in order to cover any loss of revenue due to missed entries, but to position themselves, in the context of the crisis and emergency, as active subjects, so much so that they have been able to communicate openly with the audience and ‘paradoxically, even with their doors shut, museums have never been more accessible’ (Aksoy 2020). The museums’ response has focused on strengthening the virtual narratives made available on many platforms free of charge and communication through social networks, often showing objects and stories hidden in the repositories thanks to photographic images, videos and short explanatory texts. This reaction has involved both important and very active museums on social networks, but also those closed or normally not very active, such as the museums of the University of Turin.

This has frequently happened through an informal associationism between institutions, whether based on a simple shared hashtag, or with real ‘marathons’ and structured projects between institutions temporarily united in consortium. For example, MiBACT (Italian Ministry of Culture) has collected the digital initiatives of museums, theatres and cinemas under the hashtag #iorestoacasa (“I stay home”, actually used for any public national message of any sort by anyone). However, many museums have spontaneously used #museichiusimuseiaperti (“Closed Museums Open Museums) to promote their activities, while the Egyptian Museum in Turin has instead promoted #laculturacura (“Culture Cures”).

What has been proposed lately has made it possible not to lose contact with the audience and should have stimulated and reached new ones. In order not to lose what has been achieved and to put good practices into use, it is necessary to find a way to consolidate these initiatives and this dialogue with people, so that they will feel the need to go to huge museums, to most important galleries and to famous archaeological parks, but moreover to go where they have never gone: i.e. all those institutions that until now had told their stories only to smaller audiences of specialists or enthusiasts.

3. MUSEUMS AND OTHER REALITIES: SYNERGIES ON THE TERRITORY

It is obvious that a first strategy of relationship consolidation between already known or less known museums and old and new audiences is to promote practices of interaction in person or virtually that are already part of the cultural offer of any museum. But the consolidation of the relationship also passes through a more concrete synergy with those realities that promote cultural initiatives on the territory (performances, concerts, projections, but also video filming can take place), where the objects become interlocutors of the content of the representation or of the cultural product. Finally, the museum and its objects could also host photography, painting, drawing and writing workshops where the cultural artefacts would merely be an opportunity for practice, i.e. changing their usual contemplation as objects of study (as happens in educational workshops about the object).

4. A TRUE AND CONCRETE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSEUM INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITIES

4.1. Museums *for* the people

Being able to guarantee a safe and pleasant situation, the first audience to which ethnographic, anthropological, and world culture museums as well as ethnographic museums of local history, (increasingly understood as cultural centres), must refer to is the local audience, i.e. the people who live in and visit the area (the neighbourhood, the country, the city or the region). Locals should now be considered as the first interlocutors of the museum, while tourist routes should find space later on and with a less priority approach than in the pre-lockdown phase (Karp *et al.* 1992; Council of Europe 2005; Simon 2016). In particular, ‘the social role and biography of objects’ are by now concepts often used in museums of anthropology and ethnography (Kopytoff 1986), and care for the sensitivity and involvement of the audience and indigenous stakeholders are essential in ethnographic museums starting from Clifford’s concept of contact zone (1997), now used as a fundamental approach to ethnographic collections to interpret and contribute to contemporary society and to represent and respect otherness.

4.2. Museums *with* the people

4.2.1. Listening to the community

Listening, embracing and trying to meet the needs of the citizenry should become the usual practice of the same museums that now want to work for and with the people. Perhaps it is the very fact of being at the same time spaces with their own precise rules (for example, not being able to drink or eat in the exhibition areas) now enhanced by a whole series of safety devices in relation to the specific emergency and post-emergency situations that a society can experience (in this case, for example, the risk of contagion) and contexts already perceived in themselves as somehow ‘sacred’ (due as much to the symbolic importance of the objects they guard as to the silence that often permeates them or the way they are walked, etc.), could now make them particularly welcoming, comfortable and therefore suitable for the collective practice of activities for the physical, emotional and emotional well-being of people. Perhaps starting from those whom the individuals, isolated in their homes during quarantine, have dedicated themselves by relating only virtually through a computer: let’s think of the hypothesis of hosting yoga meetings (practice already tested at the Castello d’Albertis – Museum of World Cultures in Genoa, Italy; De Palma 2019) or reading groups, or perhaps even opening them up to spontaneous initiatives by the people who visit them (let’s imagine, for example, using places and objects for meditation, especially if the museum hosts a Korean suseok stone!).

During the quarantine, in fact, Italian citizens tried to make their own contribution to the collective good through any available instrument, conceiving and creating spontaneous and bottom-up cultural initiatives (Balma Tivola and Mangiapane 2020), which in the future should be recovered by museum institutions. The museums’ effort to listen to their audience could manifest in verifying what ordinary citizens did during the emergency, and collecting, supporting and

translating it into ongoing practices on which to build a new way for museum institutions and the audience to relate.

4.2.2. *The community as a museum collaborator, not merely an interlocutor*

Thus museums shift from ‘temples’ of abstract culture into a territory at least partially original in terms of exploration, inspiration and use by the citizenry, becoming, in the happiest of hypotheses, truly integral parts of people’s lives: places in which where the community expresses itself, confronts itself, and ‘constructs itself concretely as such’ in protected contexts suitable for that purpose.

In this direction, it should also become ‘normal’ to donate one’s own objects to museums, as they bear witness to memories, stories and personal biographies, and form part of the collective memory of a cultural community. Many museums promoted this collective construction precisely in response to the emergency, with the various calls (whose results are not yet known as the calls are still open (at July 2020) made by various museums to document this epoch-making event and the way it was perceived and experienced by citizens. We can cite, for example, the call dated 12 May 2020 entitled *CONFINI. We redesign the spaces at the time of the Coronavirus* of the Museo Regionale dell’Emigrazione dei Piemontesi del Mondo in Frossasco (Turin), or that of MeVe (Memoriale Veneto Grande Guerra di Montebelluna, Treviso) entitled *Snapshots from the present. Witnesses at the time of Covid-19* dated 27 April 2020. Hence their usage, always remaining within the above-mentioned contingent situation, for temporary exhibitions that will represent and tell the story.

However, private objects, as well as documents and photographs, that come from the ‘intimate’ and affective sphere of people, could in general be more and more intentionally and frequently used for (physical and virtual) exhibitions and other activities, thus becoming material for the collective construction of the above-mentioned community memory, with the museum then emerging also as a vehicle for self-representation where the interaction between this heritage and the institutional one offers a change of perspective favouring multiple subjectivities (Pecci 2019).

Finally, by really including objects, narratives, memories and desires of the audience, the same museums could reorient their content to stay concretely within their mission, i.e. to restore the memory and (pluralistic) identity of a community, where intentions often struggle to become reality.

5. CONCLUSIONS

For all these reasons, we believe that the most appropriate model to respond to the different cultural needs of the moment is that of the ‘museum of the people for the people’: with this model the memory and culture of a community is built, discussed and deposited through objects, where the museum, a place that works for social harmony (ICOM 2010), definitively becomes the context of social and cultural relations for the community, with a view to achieving a more stable situation and a greater collective social well-being (Turner 1982).

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