

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

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The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

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fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

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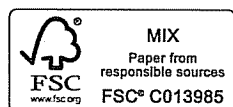
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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 13

The Postcolonial 'Exhibitionary Complex': The Role of the International Expo in Migrating and Multicultural Societies

Stefania Zuliani

Rightfully finding its place in the lively international debate that has involved museums since the late 1980s and has given rise to a New Museology which puts the museum and its functions at the centre of a very broad and critical reflection, Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) has significantly contributed to redefining the requirements and reasons for the affirmation of this institution. The museum is no longer exclusively framed within the history of collecting and its evolution – still very much the case in Italian museology – but is included in the complex network of relations (both conceptual and of power) which have led to the development of modern exhibition devices. Rather than considering the gradual rise of the museum institution as a cornerstone of modernity in an independent and thus reductive manner, Bennett chose to define and discuss 'the exhibitionary complex' in all its complexity. He points out that what he has called 'Technologies of Progress' have found a space of representation and verification not only in the secluded rooms of the museum, but also in other public spaces equally involved in the practice of 'showing and telling':

The fair and the exhibition are not, of course, the only candidates for consideration in this respect Equally, the museum has undoubtedly been influenced by its relations to cultural institutions which, like the museum itself and like the early international exhibitions, had a rational and improving orientation: libraries and public parks, for example. ... They are also institutions which, in being open to all-comers, have shown a similar concern to devise ways of regulating the conduct of their visitors, and to do so, ideally, in ways that are both unobtrusive and self-perpetuating. (Bennett 1995, 6)

In contrast to what was proposed by Douglas Crimp in the dense pages of his essay *On the Museum's Ruins* (1993), where, using theoretical tools and categories derived from Michel Foucault, and from *Discipline and Punish* in particular, Bennett suggested reading the museum and institutions related to it within a 'carceral archipelago': 'There is another institution of confinement awaiting such archaeological analysis – the museum – and another discipline –

art history' (Crimp 1993, 48). The author of *The Birth of the Museum*, although keeping Foucault's archaeology as a reference, opted to define the nature of the museum and other exhibiting institutions in terms not of confinement, but of exhibition and organisation of rules, noting in particular that the 'significance of the formation of the exhibitionary complex ... was that of providing new instruments for the moral and cultural regulation of the working classes' (Bennett 1995, 73).

Whether permanent or temporary, according to Bennett the exhibition is in fact always a visual system that involves a continuous self-monitoring on behalf of the public, which in the context of the exhibition becomes itself an exhibition according to a control strategy implicating, above all, a revolutionary vision technology:

The exhibitionary complex ... perfected a self-monitoring system of looks in which the subject and object positions can be exchanged, in which the crowd comes to commune with and regulates itself through interiorizing the ideal of an ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power – a site of sight accessible to all. (Bennett 1995, 69)

The visitor, as Thomas Struth emphasised in his *Museum Photographs* (1993), is therefore both the subject and object of vision, he watches and is watched, he knows and recognises himself, enrolling in a movement that contributes simultaneously to form a new public and a new vision system (see Struth 2008). And this is exactly what happened, not without causing great astonishment, in London during the Great Exhibition of 1851, a key event in the history of the modern exhibitionary complex, a place for regulating the masses and creating an audience. In what is commonly considered the first World's Fair, in preparation for many years and having its roots 'in Biblical bazaars, medieval markets, anywhere that people congregate for barter and trade' (Greengard 1986, 46), it acknowledged the Paris Expositions Nationales as its immediate forerunner, a model to imitate and surpass in size and globalising ambition (Colombo 2012, 44).¹ The Fair had the opportunity to exert its central position as a democratic *panopticon* (Bennett 1995, 69) for exhibition and mass entertainment, and the Crystal Palace was its symbol and modern monument. Thanks to the participation of 12 nations and the presence of a section devoted to so-called primitive peoples, the Great Exhibition of London, which Gottfried Semper described as 'a sort of Babel', was able to reveal the contradictions of the present, not least because of its seemingly confused nature (Semper 1989). It presented itself as a model of universal representation that had a dual nature, operating at the same time by expansion (the Fair as a living museum or encyclopaedia) and contraction – the Fair as a sort of 'global village' (Greengard 1986, 49) – according to an ambiguous scheme which has been perpetuated with remarkable persistence ever since.

1 For an iconographic history of the Universal Expositions, see Mattie (1998).

The Pilgrimage to the Commodity Fetish

The World's Fair in fact continues to present itself as a vast panoply of objects and people – and not surprisingly, it has even been called a 'human zoo' – especially colonial Expos – which, now as then, widely adopts ephemeral, often hypertrophic and even irrational architectural structures. It is also a concentrated and claustrophobic microcosm which portrays, in an emphatic manner, cultures and symbolic productions drawn from everywhere. On the one hand, these are arranged in a declared and even ostentatious educational manner, and on the other, relentlessly reduced to the paradoxically reassuring paradigm of goods.

Expos seem indeed to have represented the epitome of nascent modernity, not just its glitzy showcase. This is due not only to the sophisticated and appropriately provisional exhibits that displayed the triumphant story of technological progress and benefits related to the emergence of a capitalistic model of development, but also to the influence they have had in contributing to the education of an ever-increasing public. What every World's Fair still seems to show today, in an age which is far removed from, and epistemologically irreducible to, the birth of the exhibitionary complex, is a marvellous educational (propaganda?) and entertainment machine, a huge 'edutainment' space, to use the term that has caught on in museum studies in recent years. The contents have undoubtedly changed over the centuries without calling into question the celebratory vocation of all World's Fairs.

In the Fair, of course, the glorious stages and ever-successful results of the triumph of the machine and the achievements of Western civilisation are no longer recorded. Nor is it possible to read it in terms of a potlatch, or ritual gift, that the often astronomical costs and excellence which characterise each Expo might suggest.² Yet, while passing from the late nineteenth-century exaltation of technology to the ecological emphasis of the turn of the millennium (Expo 2000 in Hanover was dedicated to 'sustainable development', Expo 2005 in Aichi focused on 'Nature's Wisdom', and in 2010 in Shanghai, the theme was 'Better City, Better Life'), the spirit of the World's Fair remains, at least in intent and official statements.³ It continues to provide a mirror of a civilisation which has not stopped believing in the advancement of the arts and sciences and the consequences for quality of life and social justice ('Feed the Planet: Energy For Life' is to be the theme of the next World Expo in Milan in 2015). But is it really possible that an institution so deeply entrenched in modern thought, fuelled by the universalistic ambitions of modernity as well as its happiness-seeking utopias, by what Menna (1968) called *Profezia di una società estetica* ('The Prophecy of an Aesthetic Society'), has maintained its mission and value intact in a time that seems to be no longer even postmodern? Is this, as Arnold Gehlen (1961) suggested, the temporality of *post-*

2 Benedict (1983) compared international expositions to the ritual of the potlatch.

3 On this matter, see Official Site of the Bureau International des Expositions: <http://www.bie-paris.org/site/> (accessed 10 November 2013).

histoire, marked by a globalisation that has little to do with *mondialisation* and the creation of worlds advocated by Jean-Luc Nancy? The answer was given, ahead of his time as usual, by Walter Benjamin.

As long ago as the 1930s, Benjamin pointed out how the work of art had changed in value in the age of mechanical reproduction, going from a cultural to an essentially exhibitory state (Benjamin 2008). Making specific reference to the Universal Exhibitions, he stressed that these were primarily 'places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish' (Benjamin 1999, 7). The notion of the commodity as fetish – which Benjamin certainly owed to Marx – has now combined with the all-pervasive value of exhibition to take on a further, ominous meaning. For the exhibition – which always involves shift and risk – is in itself an inexorable process of fetishisation, and Giorgio Agamben (2005) goes so far as to speak of the museification of the world. As Walter Benjamin says:

The world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which their use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others. (Benjamin 1999, 7–8)

This observation about the universal exhibitions proves to be an extraordinarily effective tool for understanding how the transition from the teleology of the modern period to a *post-histoire* has not at all marred, as one would have expected, the prestige of the modern exhibitionary complex. The triumph of fetishism and the consequent establishment of a mechanism of alienation which, addressed 'to the living ... defends the rights of the corpse', has produced the 'sex appeal of the inorganic' (Benjamin 1999, 7–8). As argued acutely by Mario Perniola (2004), this characterises the contemporary moment, resulting in the post-human aesthetic horizon of the late twentieth century. Thus, not only is the crisis of the modern and the emergence of an unstable and complex postmodern condition marked by the 'critical laxity' identified by Lyotard; the processes of decolonisation, poststructuralist deconstructive logic and the concept of difference have contributed the downfall of the museum.

Today, it is an institution that is more than ever vital and productive (Zuliani 2009). The Universal Exhibitions have never lost their impact and seductive power, because it is the exhibition itself – the exhibition value and its associated fetishisation – which has stated unconditionally and with absolute pervasiveness its dominance in the contemporary scene. Of course, political and economic situations have changed. Long gone is the time when, for the great colonial powers, World's Fairs were occasions 'to show a sense of their own superiority over the cultures of their colonised dependents' (Benedict 1991, 5) by staging exotic exhibits which included objects and peoples – 'From exotic products to exotic peoples was not a

large step', noted Benedict (1991, 8) acutely. Today, it is rather corporations that have a dominating role within the Universal Exhibitions:

The major innovations in design and symbol-making in post-World War II exhibitions have come not from nations, new or old, but from multi-national corporations. Their logos have become better known than many national symbols. ... Corporations have employed amusement-area techniques such as rides, mechanical monsters and theatrical entertainment. ... International exhibitions now seem to reflect a new form of dependency. (Benedict 1991, 8)

Is the Universal Expo Really a 'Genuine World Tour'?

From the paternalistic dominance of colonial empires to the spectacular one of transnational corporations: this is, without a doubt, a significant shift which, far from contradicting, further underlines the continuing symbolic power and the massive media and cost of the Expos (whose financial outcomes, it is worth emphasising, are increasingly likely to be in the red, which makes the tough competition involving the candidate cities to accommodate the 2020 edition difficult to understand).

This actually lends support to those who, like Patrick Young, have rather forcedly wanted to see the Great Exhibitions of the nineteenth century as 'the point of germination for many defining practices of our current media-saturated global order' (Young 2008, 340). This hypothesis, the result of a retrospective look which raises the question of the fake-authentic relationship connected to the exotic presence and performance in the 'first' World's Fairs (in particular, the reference is to the Palais de Colonie at the 1889 Expo), maybe applies too carelessly paradigms from successive contexts and cultural conditions. It is no coincidence, I think, that Young (2008) mistakenly sets the establishment of the Musée de l'Homme too early, in 1878. What definitely remains to be discussed is the meaning of a Universal Exhibition in contemporary society.

This is a multicultural and migrating society that needs to create a 'terrestrial citizenship' (Edgar Morin), but which, unfortunately, is increasingly marked by ethnic, religious and nationalistic conflicts and contradictions that perfectly match the processes of cultural globalisation once again based on the fetishism of commodities and the fetish of financial capital. Can the World's Fair, with its optimistic intentions and vaunted belief in progress, really transform the contradictions and perspectives of a post-industrial and global system which, in order to respond to the crisis of productive systems, cannot avoid creating new relations and new paradigms of economic and cultural development? The question must initially be posed in terms of representation and critical distance. How is the relationship between the World's Fairs and the real world established today? In migrating and multicultural societies, is it possible that the Expo can maintain

its role as a sensational diorama of the world, capable of providing the visitor with the illusion that he/she can access every tradition and culture without much effort? 'In a few hours we have just completed a genuine world tour,' we read in the handbook for the 1937 Paris Expo (Berot-Berger 1937, 83), and as James D. Herbert convincingly pointed out for this World's Fair in particular, 'rather than antecedent to its representations, the real world emerges largely as their product' (Herbert 1995, 109).

The World's Fair arose, then, as a radically different territory, as a 'heterotopias', to quote Foucault, a place whose functioning contradicts all other places. An autonomous system of signs, essentially self-referential, where the common coordinates of space and time are lacking, produces a country with no borders and recognisable history, in which one could at the same time feel excluded from the real world and be the owner of the whole world. This is just, according to Roland Barthes, what happens when one is at the top of the Eiffel Tower, which was built, it is worth remembering, for the 1889 World's Fair as the emblem of a prodigious modernity. More than a reflection, a representation or a synthesis of the real world, the Universal Exhibition is then offered as another world, just as real. It is a construction of meaning that, distanced from everyday reality, could also provide a critical perspective on the latter, maybe even highlighting issues and tensions still unexploded which, although disguised, become readable in the architecture of the national (nationalistic) pavilions, exactly as occurred in 1937 in Paris.

During the Fair, the world looked at itself, just as the public acknowledged itself in the promenades of the Expo. What remains today of that relationship, the result of a difference, of a conscious distance? Looking at the proposals and effects of the 2010 Shanghai Expo, which in terms of sheer size and ambition certainly represents an inescapable and controversial reference point, it seems very little.

We are the World, We are the Fair

'The fair is not a fake copy of a "real" world, but as a simulation it marks the breakdown of the distinction of the copy from the original, of the fair from the world. The world/fair is everything and nothing, simultaneously nowhere and now here' (Nordin 2012). This is the unequivocal and disturbing conclusion reached by Astrid H.M. Nordin, the author of a recent study on the Shanghai Expo. A drastic statement, the result of a reflection which, using appropriate categories and theoretical tools borrowed from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), emphasises the impossibility of identifying even a minimal distance between the World's Fair and the world, both hyper-real outcomes of the contemporary condition. This is a condition in which any form of abstraction can no longer exist, since every possible referentiality is lost – 'No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept'

(Baudrillard 1994) – and the infinite proliferation of simulacra has led to the 'divine irrelevance of images'. No distinction between reality and imagination, or between true and false.

This is the image that China has given, first to itself – 95 per cent of the 73 million visitors of the Shanghai Expo were Chinese citizens (Padovani 2010) – and then to the world through the national pavilions and those of corporations, located in two different parts of a vast area which, two years after the event, looks like an eerie no man's land, a 'non-place' (Augé) featuring mock-ruins and building sites. These, in turn, promote other huge and equally ephemeral cathedrals of consumption (currently under construction is the Chocolate Happy Land, which will use some of the Arab pavilions), and coincide perfectly with the glowing phantasmagoria of the commodity, a fetish and universal simulacrum, a show no longer 'concentrated' or 'diffuse', but as Guy Debord wrote in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 'integrated' (Debord 1990, 8).

There is no longer a show of the world of the commodity dominating life, simply because there is no world other than the very exhibition of goods. 'An uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference' (Baudrillard 1994, 6) in which the presence, of a dusty and even inappropriate legacy, the national pavilions that were so deeply rooted in the tradition of the modern exhibitionary complex, loses all ideological significance and causes no conflict or controversy. In Shanghai, everything, the real and/is fake, is on show and, after all, 'in few places is the question of the real and the imaginary, the true and the false, the original and the fake as pertinent and as sensitive as in contemporary China' (Nordin 2012).

All in all, the important thing is not to escape the accusation of plagiarism (which, among other things, even involved the Expo anthem), but to carefully avoid any infringement of the stereotype: the multi-ethnic and multicultural society is not at all removed or denied, but the macro/micro cosmos of the World's Fair simply exhibits it in a horizontal sum of reassuring clichés: the Italian Pavilion, donated to the Chinese People and renamed the Shanghai Italian Center, still welcomes the coaches of orderly tourists with the music of 'Funiculì Funiculà' and the pop voice of Pavarotti. What remains of the halls of North Africa still evokes an atmosphere of souks, deserts and paper oases, while the impressive China Pavilion, today the China Art Palace, a spectacular upside-down ziggurat colloquially known as the Oriental Crown, which overlooks the glistening spaceship of the Mercedes Benz Arena (which during the Expo was the Shanghai World Expo Cultural Center), is, of course, lacquer red and CCP red.

An 'Educational Turn'

In our 'hyperreal world of simulacra' it seems there is no way to break through the surface: the crime has taken place, reality has been killed, and its shining, lifeless

remains do nothing but increase 'the sex appeal of the inorganic'. The Exhibition – the World's Exhibition – cannot permit conflict, does not tolerate dissonance; it is traditionally sedating. Must we therefore surrender to being witnesses of the phantasmagoria of goods (whether produced by art or by science), to its exuberant performance, which is also the show of commercial diplomacy and corporate culture?

Certain recent signals from the art world suggest that if there is a possibility of corroding an apparently perfect mechanism, this lies in regaining some critical distance through experimenting with new educational practices. It is the 'educational turn' (O'Neill and Wilson 2010; Zuliani 2012) that, by overturning the modern paradigm of education as a means of disciplining, of which the exhibitionary complex was the very site of elaboration and affirmation, reconsiders education not as content delivery, but primarily as an experience of the other, as a site of transit and encounter. And also as a necessary expression and processing of conflict. This is the gap, in many ways uncomfortable and not without pitfalls, in which artists and critics today, along with curators and museum educators, act to counter the sterile purity and authoritarian neutrality of the exhibition. It is a job pursued in residual spaces. It dares to deal in anachronism and even obsolescence, and without identity nostalgia or neo-tribalistic temptations, seeks to defend the right to contradict and query. It is a critical exercise which seeks unique contexts, small communities, that live through contagion and relationship, duration and roots.

It would be nice if the next World's Fair in Milan, unfortunately already suspected of promoting gentrification, did not simply celebrate in 2015 the overblown epic of 'green' corporations, but endorsed, starting from its planning and building, a necessary relationship with the territory and citizens. This could become the laboratory and document of an educational effort, a patient practice of translation, dialogue and research which would also, but not only, lead to a new type of public art.

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