

# 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

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Kōz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

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Orabona and Quadraro

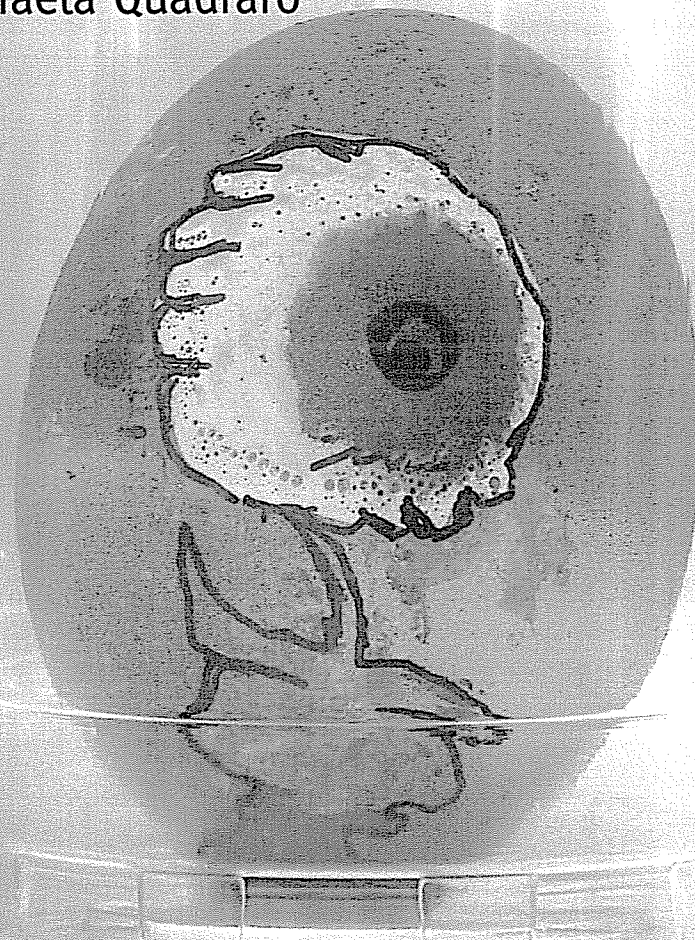
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The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

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examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

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**RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums**

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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*Edited by*

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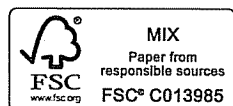
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# Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

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 7

# Performance in the Museum Space (for a Wandering Society)

Margherita Parati

### **Museums in Transformation and the Emergence of a 'Performing Model'**

Museums are undergoing a profound institutional and cultural transformation in the contemporary 'age of migrations' (Basso Peressut and Pozzi 2012, 31–7). In the 'geography of supermodernity' (Augé 2009) in which we live, comprising a network of flows of information, people, objects and ideas, museums play a connecting role in social, cultural and economic dynamics, on both the local and global scale. The idea of the museum as the symbol of a dominant identity, which originates from the certainties of the modern era, is questioned in the postcolonial viewpoint (Ferrara 2012). A new perspective is emerging, which involves a necessary critical review of the cultural role played by the museum, targeted at a society that has deeply changed and is now global, multicultural and multiethnic. In view of its 'new publics', the museum has to adjust its communicative strategies. Cultural institutions, and museums in particular, are required to ensure accessibility of message, learning motivation and the visitor's direct participation, among other new competences. In this context, the museum is seen as a medium of communication where the dynamics of object–subject–space can be investigated.

Starting from these premises, this chapter focuses on a specific phenomenon: the use and re-evaluation of performing language, based on direct actions and physical experience, in museum narrations and spaces. The phenomenon will be framed from a theoretical point of view, singling out the potentialities and criticalities of this language, leading to a reflection on the mechanisms of narrative construction and memory stimulation. The specific case of art museums and their spaces will be taken into consideration, where art itself experiences the potentialities of such a language.

The American scholar Valery Casey focuses on the relationship between object and subject. In her paper 'The Museum Effect: Gazing from Object to Performance in the Contemporary Cultural-history Museum' (2003), she highlights the power that museums have in communicating a message to their public. Casey acknowledges the priority of the visual component in the impact of the exhibit: sight is the most stimulated sense in the media reality we live in, and the scholar takes it as the parameter to analyse the relationship between object and subject and the 'screen' that is the 'filter' represented by the exhibition space.

Casey defines three possible relational dynamics that occur between the visitor and the exhibit, showing how they correspond to three 'models' in the evolution of museum typology: from the 'legislating museum', as seen in *Wunderkammern* and *cabinets de curiosités* in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, to the 'interpreting museum', typical of the public museum in the nineteenth century, which had a precise didactic purpose, to the contemporary 'performing museum', where the explanatory caption of the object is replaced by *performance*. In describing the latter model, the author refers to Living History – that is, those forms of musealisation which occur through theme re-enactments, where the non-authentic object is concretely 're-used' and made known to the visitors by means of theatre acts in which they are invited to take part. Leaving aside the heated debates that are triggered by these re-enactment practices, it is worth noting the importance attributed by Casey to the acknowledgement of the performance as an alternative and contemporary narrative 'strategy'. The performance replaces the object, and the visitor is actively involved on stage.

Such reasoning leads to interpreting the performance as a 'relational strategy' and identifying the *performing museum* as a contemporary model to reflect upon. It is possible to talk about an outright change of paradigm, where instead of mere display, the visitors' direct experience becomes central (Bagnall 2003). The performing paradigm calls into question the relationships among object–subject–space and the sensory modalities through which we experience contents. In this context, Pedro Gadanho, curator of the MoMA Architecture section in New York, talks about 'Performative Turn' and 'return to the user', referring to the contemporary social role of architecture and its design process (Gadanho 2012).

### 'Performing Strategy': Potentialities and Criticalities

Performing language is seen as a *strategy* that is now part of the mechanisms of narrative construction within the museum. There are various ways for putting such strategy into practice: from authentic theatrical representations (the Museum Theatre phenomenon) to storytelling, to interpretations in the first person, to artists' performances, to *hands-on* strategies encouraging visitors to touch objects (Jackson and Kidd 2011). There are many examples, from the debated Colonial Williamsburg Museum, the largest museum in the world built on the model of Living History, to the recent 'hands-on stands', as in London's British Museum, where visitors can touch some historical objects and ask museum staff for information and explanations.

Recognising the increasing interest in the cultural implications of performance, seen as essentially contested concept, Casey (2005) highlights the potentialities and criticalities of its dynamics in the museum space. As happens with all languages, performance is instrumental with respect to the action and content conveyed. There are plenty of examples in history where such language

was used for its potential of creating emotional involvement: from Classical Tragedy to popular traditions and rites, to its manipulation for propaganda purposes, as in the Nazi era.

On one hand, performance can be seen as a powerful form of control on narration in the hands of a single 'director', running the risk of becoming pure entertainment or manipulation. On the other, it can create a *displacement effect* with respect to the observed reality, turning such language into an opportunity to stimulate a critical awareness by working on 'other' communicative channels capable of encouraging participation. By focusing on *action*, the performing strategy breaks the hierarchical frontality of the relationship between visitor and exhibit, using a kind of language which is universal by its very nature, namely the language expressed by gestures and the body, which does not require any translation. The real potential of triggering forms of constructive participation and learning, which are unique owing to the space and time in which they take place, lies in this subversion of the elements.<sup>1</sup> Visitors become a key element in the development of the narration. Their physical engagements awake 'other' forms of memory – more intuitive and sensorial – as opposed to the merely visual mode of exploring spaces and contents.

The performing strategy is seen to have great potential in the search for a more inclusive and less authoritative idea of narration within museums, which are revisited in a multicultural perspective as 'contact zones' for confrontation (Clifford 1997). In these spaces for encounter, body and movement are seen as instruments to convey ideas of cultural identity (Goldberg [1979] 2011). Moreover, the relation to the physicality of spaces and objects imposes itself as the counterpart to totalising digitalisation: rather than denying or aiming to replace it, it can potentially integrate with it. This language makes it possible to figure out forms of re-activation and re-reading of the collections from different points of view and with different voices, forms of stratification of the narration levels, introducing a transitional temporality into the museum.

### Stimuli from the Art World and Experimentations on Museum Architecture

Many artists are re-discovering techniques and languages typical of the artistic practices that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and are generically referred to as 'performance art' (Goldberg, [1979] 2011). Such practices, along with experimentation of sensorial languages involving the body, gestures and the new media, have asserted the social and political value of making art which is

<sup>1</sup> See the meaningful passage that took place in the 1970s, from behavioural educational theories (behaviourist psychology) to cognitive ones (cognitive psychology). The pioneers of such educational theories are Bruner and Piaget, who in the 1970s started experimenting new modes of learning based on the subject's involvement (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Miles and Zavala 1993).

strictly linked to contemporary cultural transformations, calling into question the museum space and its very role. Blurring the boundaries between the conventional spaces for art and urban dimension, contemporary artistic practices such as 'relational art' (Bourriaud 1998) and 'new genre public art' (Lacy 1995) find in 'performance' a powerful media through which to activate processes of social engagement and participation. Thanks to the adoption of such language, questions of gender, race and migration – which have long been excluded from institutional circuits – are allowed to enter the museum spaces.

This is the case, for example, with the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, who, since her very first works, has turned her artistic practice into political action. Her long-term travelling project *Immigrant Movement International*, developed in collaboration with the Queens Museum of Art in New York, aims to raise issues and a debate about what happens outside the museum space, specifically discussing the implications of having a migrating identity.<sup>2</sup>

The rediscovery of the provocative potential of performing language in the arts is confirmed by many exhibitions and events that have taken place during 2012. In the United States, the latest biennial exhibition of the Whitney Museum in New York has devoted a lot of space to performers; the Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries in Beacon (New York) have inaugurated a programme of performances by contemporary American choreographers, including Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer; in winter 2012, PS1, the MoMA extension located in the Queens borough in New York, opened a 'Performance Dome' in the courtyard in front of the building.

In Europe, too many museums are currently enlarging their premises to make room for such artistic practices. This is the case, for example, at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the new Centre for Contemporary Creation, due to open in Córdoba in early 2013. So we can ask: What spaces do these renewed artistic performing practices require in the museum? How do they challenge not only the museum's programmes, but also its spatial configuration? How is museum architecture influenced by these fluid dynamics that cross its urban fabric?

### The Tanks at Tate Modern

In July 2012, London's Tate Modern inaugurated The Tanks, the first space to be exclusively dedicated to performing arts in a museum at the international level. The conversion of The Tanks, former underground containers used to store oil for the Bankside Power Station turbines, is part of the wider museum enlargement project being developed by the studio Herzog & de Meuron. The Tanks are three circular spaces 30 metres in diameter and 7 metres in height,

directly accessible from the Turbine Hall. Two of the three are adjacent to the Collection Room, where works in the museum collection are exhibited: the Commission space, which houses *site-specific* installations, and the Live space, which houses alternating events, installations and performances.

The Live space, in particular, was at the heart of the *Art in Action* festival, curated by Catherine Wood, Kathy Noble and Stuart Comer, which inaugurated The Tanks last July. The festival offered an experimental programme of events, with the precise aim of providing visitors with a space for dialogue and discussion, questioning the role of the museum today. Before being an architectonic space, The Tanks aim at being a social space. In the *Open Manifesto* published in the festival programme, Tate Modern's Director, Chris Dercon, states:

[The Tanks] provide an entirely new space for Tate Modern, and for museums internationally. ... They challenge many aspects of what has been important to museums – their collection and modes of display and archive – and ask vital new questions of what is to be a museum in the twenty-first century. ... We can think of the museum in the twenty-first century as a new kind of mass medium. Many of the works presented in the Tanks address their audience directly, emphasising the visitor's own physical presence, whether that be by being part of a crowd surrounding a performer, becoming part of a conversation, or walking through and around an immersive installation. (Grant and Danby 2012, 2)

For fifteen weeks the Live Tank functioned as a genuine experimental laboratory, investigating the relationship between performance art, the museum and contemporary society. It hosted events enabling artists and visitors to physically move between the internal spaces of the museum and the external spaces of the borough. This was the case for the exposition *Inside/Outside: Materialising the Social*, and the day dedicated to the project *Across the Board: Politics of Representation*, when two African artists, Otobong Nkanga and Nástio Mosquito, performed in the first of four planned stages of the project (London–Accra–Douala–Lagos), due to last two years. The London event addressed reflections on cultural identity to explore the politics of representation and their strategies in contemporary African art. Nkanga activated the space of the Tank with a performance as part of her project *Contained Measures*, focusing on the shifting state of intangible things such as memory and identity. Visitors were invited to sit in front of her and discuss their impressions of photos she had previously selected, representing, for example, African landscapes, parts of her own work or works of art from the Tate Collection. In the evening, the Tank hosted the performance *Flourishing Seeds* by Mosquito, structured as an alternation of video projections, 'a cappella' songs and the spoken word, questioning our way of understanding notions of art, Africa and the West.

In just one day, very different performances alternated in the Tank, requiring a different layout and outfitting of the space (Figure 7.1). Whereas Nkanga was sitting at a table with visitors moving around her, Mosquito was singing and

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/486-0-Immigrant+Movement+International.htm> (accessed 6 November 2013).

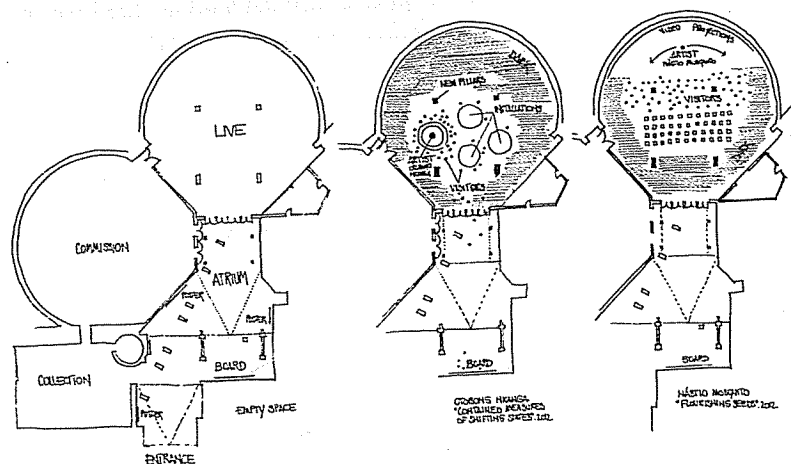


Figure 7.1 Different layouts in the Live Tank for the project *Across the Board*. Sketches by Margherita Parati, 2012

moving in a more dynamic way in front of the circular walls with videos projected on them, while the public could watch sitting on the floor or on chairs placed in the central part of the space.

In the evocative architecture of The Tanks, where the traces of history are visible on the ageing walls and apparent in the intense smell of oil, these artists' performing languages found a powerful ally in triggering visitors' intellectual and emotional involvement. The architects' interventions on the space have emphasised its theatrical character, simply replacing the old floor with a smooth concrete base, highlighting the centre of the space with new pillars, and introducing the necessary equipment to ensure its potential and fast transformation. The titles of works can be projected onto the walls, while captions explaining the projects are simply written on paper attached to the rough walls, as if they were advertising billboards. One of the walls in the entrance hall is used as a big blackboard, where visitors are invited to write comments on their experience in the space, answering some questions projected on the wall. The Tanks are new spaces that have been 'discovered', where Tate Modern is experimenting with new strategies of visitor participation, exploiting the stimuli from art in order to investigate the relationship between performance and museum architecture.

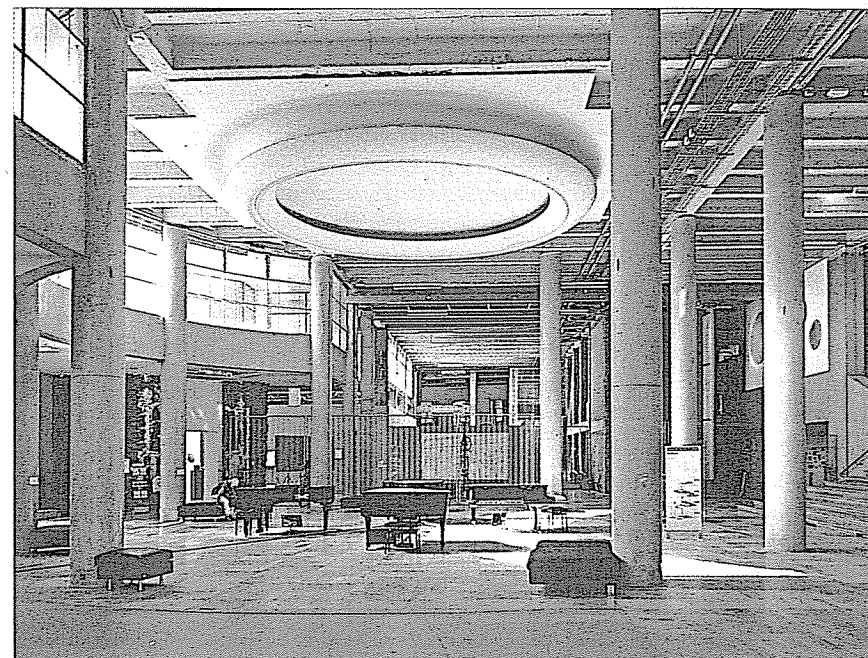


Figure 7.2 Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, 'Cavernous Agora of the Palais de Tokyo', 2012. Exhibition view from La Triennale 2012, *Intense Proximité*, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dalbera/7759895088/in/photostream/> (accessed 6 November 2013). Photograph reproduced courtesy of Jean-Pierre Dalbéra

### Palais de Tokyo in Paris

The Palais de Tokyo in Paris also sets out to be a space of confrontation and dialogue. The building was erected in 1937 for the Paris Art and Technology World Expo; it was later used as the Centre National de la Photographie and the Palais du Cinema, and today it has been turned into a 'district for contemporary creation'. When the Palais was opened in 2002, it already presented itself as an anti-museum, a *laboratory of experiences*, where the public's participation and involvement were the basis for 'relational art' exhibitions organised by the young curators Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans (Bourriaud 1998; Nicolin 2006, 7–48). In April 2012, the Palais de Tokyo opened another area covering 14,000 square metres to the public, as planned in the second phase of the project by the studio of architects Lacaton & Vassal.

In a labyrinth of fluid spaces, where small and cosy rooms alternate with large ones, the prevailing aesthetic is 'the un-finished' (Figure 7.2). The designers have

intervened in the space by subtraction, leaving traces of its various uses over time visible and removing only what impeded its public use. This way, a dimensional alternation of the spaces has been enhanced, where the *empty* space, the space where the actions take place, is an integral part of the logic that is implied in the project. Light partitions in metal or polycarbonate grids and movable furniture allow the exposition layout to be easily reconfigured as a Piranesian labyrinth with a strong urban character.

The third edition of La Triennale, entitled *Intense Proximité*, which inaugurated the extension of the Palais in April 2012, also gave ample space to the performing arts, with a view to creating a wide array of events which are continuously changing on the four floors of the building. The aim of the festival, whose special Artistic Director was Okwui Enwezor, was to highlight the role of art as a means of confrontation between cultures, as we read in the programme: 'At its core, *Intense Proximity* is based on a series of programmatic directions on the ways of sharing space, social experience, and aesthetic antagonism without resorting to the strident pieties of identity politics, nativist self-regard, ethnocentrism, and myths of national cultural cohesion' (Enwezor 2012).

According to the curators, the fragmented and episodic character of the space made it possible to have heterogeneous works and events alternating during the festival, housing a multiplicity of voices and languages, turning the Palais into an active relational space.

## Conclusions

The cases analysed in this chapter testify to a correlation between curatorial and architectural strategies while investigating the consequences of the *occupation* of the museum space on the part of performing artistic practices. As Michaela Quadraro has recently argued, with reference to the feminist theorist Elisabeth Grosz on one hand and the curatorial practice of Thelma Golden on the other, contemporary art practices challenge the institutional framework of the museum, which is thus revisited as a 'site of intervention' (Quadraro 2012, 128). Once it has been affected by these stimuli, the museum turns into an experimentation laboratory, in the perspective that Iain Chambers discusses as a possible 'Museum of Migrating Modernities', 'a location that sustains the potential, often against the institutional intentions, for a democratic laboratory of an emerging citizenship' (Chambers 2012, 24).

What role can architecture play in activating these dynamics? We find some common architectonic themes in the two cases described, as they reveal the hybridisation of design processes in art and architecture. In both cases, a clear need for flexible spaces emerges, in order to guarantee quick and continuous transformation. This leads to the integration of technological equipment in the ceilings or walls. In these new spaces, which are deliberately left rough and unfinished, the *void* plays a crucial role. These new areas are activated through

actions, and then left void again. With its ephemeral nature, performance introduces a rhythm into both museum space and museum time.

The architectonic language emphasises the primary elements of the space: floors, walls and ceilings. In designing additions, the architects focused on the surface geometry and their treatment, leaving the traces of previous uses of the space visible. Over these permanent and pre-existing layers, the exhibition design comprises flexible and removable furniture that, like a scenography, supports the gestures of both the artist and the visitor.

The Tanks and the Palais are examples of projects of the reuse of existing architectures. The same strategies, once again stimulated by the need to give room to artistic performing practices, also lie at the basis of the brand-new project by architects Nieto and Sobejano for the Centro de Creación Contemporánea, due to open in Cordoba in 2013. Here again the design of the space has to support the simultaneity of the production and exploitation of the works of art. The building plan comprises hexagonal rooms which can be connected to create different paths. These rooms are covered by concrete panels and lit from above. The idea underlying the project is the 'urban bazaar' as a place of encounter and exchange.

Is it possible to take stimuli from such recent experimentations in art museums, their programmes and their new spatial character, and apply them to other typologies of museums, to set up a different confrontation with visitors? These new interiors are open to urban practices of socialisation. In this sense, they are *performative spaces*, where architecture plays an active role in stimulating dialogue and participation. They suggest a new possible field of investigation, based on the relationship between performance and cultural spaces.

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