

Museums - the challenge of relevance

Good afternoon!

I would especially like to thank Francesca Bazoli, Michele Lanzinger, Stefano Karadjov and Pierluigi Saco for inviting me to open the conferences at this annual meeting of ICOM Italy. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here with you, today. This year's theme focuses on assessing the social impact of museum activities, a crucial aspect for the future development of museums: "Museums and Social Innovation. Measuring Impact and Sustainability Reporting as Tools for Development and Alliances with Communities and Territories".

It was said that "it aims to initiate an in-depth discussion on how to report, evaluate, and communicate museum initiatives to generate tangible value or cultural institutions and open them to positive developments and cross-sectoral influences." In this framework, I was asked to give a keynote on the new cultural policy scenario, in the current situation of deep geo-political changes.

In my presentation, I pose some theoretical questions, present some visions of the geo-political scenario and make working proposals for the museum system.

Giorgio Agamben, quoting Michel Foucault, who coined the term and concept of *biopolitics* - i.e. the increasing inclusion of man's natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power - points out how, in various ways, we are increasingly subjected to concentrationary dynamics of Power, which place every aspect of our lives under control .¹

There is a convergence of the rise of authoritarian models of political power with economies of scale in industry and commerce, through models of circulation of goods and services.

There is a convergence between technological evolution and the power to appropriate information on all aspects of personal and social life.

There is a convergence between market supply models (which are increasingly intelligent, thanks to adaptive algorithms) and the induction of forms of demand.

Today, anesthetized by bourgeois comfort and entertainment, we are easy prey for the most diverse types of ferocious animals, which are no longer lions, wolves,

¹ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer - sovereign power and bare life*, Meridian, 1998, pp 116...

snakes, crocodiles, hyenas, as they were in the early days of Humanity, but other types of beasts, which are also predatory.

We accept, resignedly or without filter, historical revisionisms, intoxications and lies coming from woke narratives and fake narratives, which saturate individuals and societies, preventing the serious and free exercise of learning, creativity, emotions and knowledge.

Thus, since Michel Foucault defined the concept of *biopolitics* at the end of the last century, we have evolved from the power of appropriation of the human body by political devices to a power of appropriation of the body and spirit by political and economic power.

There seems to be no effective awareness, in citizen's perception, of the threat that represents, the holistic knowledge of the different aspects of our individual lives, our way of thinking and feeling, by a large number of public and private entities.

With the new dynamics of generative Artificial Intelligence, which will soon be enhanced by the use of quantum computers, the powers of control of the body and spirit will be even more acute.

This model of power, beyond biopolitics, turns the world as a whole into a kind of "concentrationary camp". The technological, economic, digital, globalizations - made it.

We live in a world camp where hardware and its soft power is a powerful behavioral induction machine.

This power is the result of a panoptic surveillance², the data extrated from it and its utilization to manipulate bodies and spirits.

Today, a large eye with 360 degrees of amplitude, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, collects, processes and uses all the information about everyone, or at least almost everyone.

² Bentham, Jeremy, Panoptique, 1791.

Faced with these circumstances, what kind of Humanity are we today? What *new humanisms* do we need to design? How can we protect intimacy and build public life?

We know that, in the 21st century, the erosion of boundaries between public and private has created a new state of social matter, which is part of the global concentrationary camp in which we live.

This erosion doesn't mean that we live in a disordered society.

Because the notion of disorder implies the notion of order.

We live in a society beyond order and disorder.

It is in this *transordered society* that, despite totalitarian tendencies, new orders are being contested and others proposed.

Currently, in the inability to find them, there have been social setbacks, as people try to use and mimic previous models of order, in an attempt to "return to order", when, after all, at the moment, there is no return.

We live in a world of semiotic dislocations that intersect without necessarily meeting.

The world of today's panoptic hyperreality, which uses imagination, dreams, love and hope as instruments to manufacture the hyperreal, in a boomerang effect, turns imagination, dreams, love and hope into mere products of its own.

The world of hyper-reality, or rather, hyper-realities, has contributed to the death of the individual eye or, if you like, the critical sense.

It has contributed to the death of cultural diversity, subtle language, elegance and even *fair play*.

The world of hyper-reality has contributed to the death of the idea of death and the values that can be associated with it. In particular, the sense of historicity - falsifying experiential paradigms in an attempt to annul space-time.

Hyper-realities are correlatives of hyper-capitalism, proposed within the framework of economies of scale in dominant and customized industries.

In this context, states, companies and more or less inorganic groups, exercise power and exploit weaknesses.

There is a growing extinction of the critical and creative eye beyond that which serves the production of market products.

There is a narrowing of the plurality of cultures, in various ways, namely through what are called viral events, these dynamics of appropriation on social networks, which, in fact, contaminate and destroy diversity.

There is a reduction in the richness of language, because the discursive exercise is extended in depth and dimension beyond the average attention span.

There is a degradation of the beauty of gestures and attitudes, swallowed up by eroticization, confused with pornography.

There is a discrediting of the meaning of justice, because judicial systems are contaminated by bureaucracy, inefficiency, corruption or appropriated by dynamics of authoritarian executive systems, which turn the courts into an extension of their power.

There is a clear erosion of democratic constitutional models, without proposals for new legitimate models to improve or replace them.

And words like Humanism and Humanity have fallen in desuse.

In Paris on 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly approved Resolution 217 A, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In view of the rights it proclaims, this declaration establishes an understanding of the status of Humanity, in particular Articles 1 and 2, which I would like to mention here:

“Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.”

I made a point of reading these two articles to tell you what we all know - if, on the one hand, in the second half of the 20th century there were notable improvements in the promotion, in various countries, of this Declaration of Rights, on the other hand, in the 21st century, we are seeing a decline in these rights. It is public and notorious that we are a long way from fulfilling the values enshrined in the two articles I have just read to you.

Should museums be protagonists in the defense and promotion of an idea of Humanity or should they dedicate themselves exclusively, in a hostile social environment, to returning to more conservationist and traditional models, in a protectionist act?

What is the capacity to intervene, what is the power, in this complex present of ours? Perhaps we need to establish new maps of objectives and actions, and even discover new ways of drawing maps of territories, both physical and digital.

So often we live in the protective cocoon of the power of technical skills in conservation, programming and management.

We often live off the richness of the museums we care for, the buildings that house them, the collections, the permanent and temporary activities. So often, we live off the status given to museum careers in the context of social recognition.

Today, however, it's worth asking whether cultural inbreeding shouldn't be replaced by a more open gaze towards the world and others.

In the immense transformations in values that we are experiencing worldwide, the strategy of encapsulation can be profoundly disruptive to the essence of the museum's mission as an agent of the community.

Between revealed and obvious powers and others that are concealed or hidden, the current distribution of power makes it difficult to draw up a coherent map that allows us to read the situation of states and territories.

And it's precisely in this situation that the possibility of defining, discovering, living in harmony, building, respecting, being part of an ecosystem, becomes urgent.

An ecosystem is the home of balances, of homeostasis, of the possibilities of experiencing rules, deviations and latitudes, of promoting incremental changes, reforms or revolutions that restore or renew systems - this is how it is in Nature, and it can be this way in human societies, and also in the acceptance of the integration of human societies into the cycles of Nature.

Of course, human development efforts have sought new balances, new ecosystems. But, paradoxically, the devices that could liberate and enrich us, such as the distribution of information and knowledge online, new learning methods, the support of many tasks through artificial intelligence, data storage, advances in transportation systems, economic and financial models, political and administrative systems, housing construction techniques, medicine, agriculture - things that all together could be part of a notion of progress – today, must be questioned.

The very idea of progress, the expectation of starting at the alpha point and culminating in omega, is in deep crisis due to the collapse of the value edifice. Progress only exists in reference to an order of values.

In an order of values, we can define what is better and what is worse, what is a priority and what is an accessory. If the order of values is extinguished or is an entirely relativized order, as today frequently happens, the parameters for conferring an idea of development disappear.

All this is taking place in the time of the unbridled technological race that we are experiencing, and also in the institutional paradigm post-World War II Europe: executive, legislative and judicial powers, the power of the media, the power of economic, religious, scientific and cultural agents and public opinion.

However, these types of constituent elements of a Western social order, no longer balance each other out and can hardly be stated in this way.

Political, economic, religious, scientific and cultural paradigms are collapsing and we are crossing those inhospitable territories that lie between the known world and the new discoveries, the new ports of arrival.

If we look at the history of the sciences, practiced in different ways on different continents, from alchemy to astrology, to contemporary quantum physics or neurosciences, which are also practiced alongside Chinese medicine, yoga and shamanism, we realize how different views we have had and have about ourselves and the world around us. We believed that the Earth was flat and now it's round. We believed that Newtonian physics explained everything until quantum physics arrived. With the discoveries of the 21st century, many scientific processes have been significantly altered, both in the so-called exact sciences and in the so-called social sciences.

Isn't there also a need for a paradigm shift in the way we approach museum policy and management, given the latest data?

To evoke the word "museum" in contemporary context, is to enunciate an institutional project.

And each institution contains in the word that names it a narrative, a normativity, a recognition, a power that makes it referential in the "politics of language".

Because any language, any text, any sentence, any word, at any moment, is part of a discursive universe with political significance, here in the broader sense of an element of the *polis*, in which it is constituted and constitutive.

All the essential words in our vocabulary obey a *language policy*. Sovereign power is exercised by different groups at different times and places in history, and sovereignty also prevails in semantic structures, because the control of meanings, the power to say what each word is, is an important part of the exercise of sovereignty, a form of extension of the legislative prerogative.

Sovereign power can be exercised by the clergy, the nobility, the people, the army, oligarchs, or, as in the contemporary context, sovereign power can be dispersed in the face of a relativization of authoritative voices.

Does this dispersion of voices correspond to a polyphony, as was proposed in the definition of museum that caused so much dispute at the ICOM Kyoto meeting in 2019?

The objection is understandable, because nowadays it is not only difficult to distinguish polyphony from cacophony, but polyphonic exercise can correspond to

absolute relativization, which makes it impossible to create coherent discourses, particularly in the museum universe.

Cacophony, or the Tower of Babel, is the place of disagreement and, in this sense, finding a coherent and common voice for museology's political discourse, or rather, having a common voice among museums about the values they represent and their mission, is essential if they are not to become places of disagreement, misunderstanding, dystopia, irrelevance.

The need for political coherence on the museological discourse, is in no way a totalitarian exercise.

Defining the essence, the meaning, of an institution and its discourse in a consensual way, does not imply limiting the different manifestations that result from it.

This also applies to the multitude of types of museums: art museums, history museums, archaeology museums, science museums, industry museums, military museums, ethnographic museums, maritime museums, design museums, toy museums, car museums, fashion museums, jewelry museums...

In short, in all their immense diversity, is it possible to find a harmonization of voices in the face of common objectives and the empowerment of the museum institution as a whole, in societies undergoing rapid change?

Since ICOM was founded, in 1946, the adopted definition of a museum has changed seven times, and with these changes, the meaning of the words and the things they refer to, the "politics of language", and the inherent institutional vision.

From synthetic definitions, we have increasingly moved on to more analytical definitions, which probably demonstrates the difficulty of finding simple and consensual formulas.

Preservation, collection, research, interpretation, exhibition, terms referred to in ICOM's 2022 definition of a museum, are certainly part of the mission of museums. But the need to adjectivize the noun museum to say that it must be accessible and inclusive and that it must seek diversity and sustainability is the result of a growing need to justify cultural institutions in the face of a changing notion of culture.

I return to the question of the politics of language, to invoke the words

"Accessibility, Inclusion, Diversity, Sustainability", which are part of the current definition of "museum", adopted by ICOM in 2022.

All these words, concerning the organization of the public life of communities, function like the foundations of buildings: if they are not lifted off the ground, the foundations will be useless, without function.

Museums are an ontic element in the architecture of contemporary cultural systems, and culture, as we know, may serve both to dominate bodies and spirits and to liberate them.

Which museums do we want? A part of domination systems or tools that contribute to the liberation of bodies and spirits, with the aim of promoting enlightened and critical citizenship?

Should museums be well-disciplined pupils of the hyper-consumer society, cultural supermarkets, with exhibits distributed in showcases like consumer products are distributed on shelves, according to consumer interest?

Or, more generally, are museums spaces for commodification, economic units, exhibition factories, warehouses for works of art, cultural shopping malls, Disneylands for cultural voyeurs and tourists?

I know that museums have to be realistic, capable of having adequate management models and economic sustainability.

But hasn't the time come to realize the limits of the hyper-capitalist production models of the museological order?

Can museums be agents, actors of personal and social empowerment and play a systemic role in building new societies, new humanisms?

Over the last five decades, the so-called "new museology" has contributed to changing the focus and perspective of museum policy and management, on the one hand by shifting the perspective of what a museum is and, on the other, what its function is, namely by moving from an authoritative position to an interpretative one.³

³ Ross, Max, "Interpreting New Museology", in "Museum and Society", Jul 2004. 2 (2) 84-103, 2004, ISSN 1479-8360.

The theories of the New Museology developed in an environment of openness to cultural diversity, to the role of audiences and minorities, to questions of how to read the meaning of museum objects, to questions raised by post-colonialist and feminist theories, or even to epistemological questions about the relativism of the bases of scientific analysis and interpretation.

These theories have made a significant contribution to the evolution of the definition of a museum, particularly the most recent one.

However, the parameters on which the discussions that led to ICOM's last definition of a museum were based, in the 2010-2020 decade, have changed dramatically, given the current role of geo-political tensions, the consolidation of the presence of artificial intelligence, and the blurring of the role and boundaries between the technical-scientific field and the political field.

If, on the one hand, we can recognize excesses of voluntarism in recent decades, with certain revisions made to the museological discourse - which deserve to be discussed and possibly changed - on the other hand, how do we deal with the direct intrusion of political power in the way the concept of the museum, museum policy and museum management should be developed?

The change in the theoretical models of "New Museology" and consequent museum policy and management is necessary, given the change in the context in which it was constituted and operated.

I suggest that we think about some elements for this purpose, aware that many of these suggestions are already work in progress in different museological institutions:

1. Overcoming the dichotomy of museological authority versus interpretation of public expectations in order to achieve a decision-making circularity that integrates political, museological, academic and community decision-makers in a model that recognizes the role of each party in achieving social agreement in order to consolidate the role of each museum in particular and the museum institution in general.
2. Adopt the strategy of "leaving no one behind" when it comes to the possibilities of physical and digital access to museums, access being

understood as the ability to read and understand museum discourse as well as having the economic and social conditions to do so.

3. Write a short, clear charter of principles for each museum unit, which acts as a gateway and a key to reading the institution, allowing audiences to decode the parameters that dictate the meaning of permanent and temporary exhibitions, deposits, research, conservation and restoration centers, acquisition policies, educational policies, patronage and resource management.
4. Assuming each museum unit as a network node, for the exchange of experiences, concepts, information, good practices, resources, difficulties, regardless of their size and degree of sophistication, making the network operative and not merely symbolic.
5. Generate common methodologies within the museum network to get to know the profiles of visitors, both physical and virtual, and integrate them, whenever possible, into the dynamics of decision-making circularity, so that they become part of the "museum family".
6. Define what a basic level of "museum literacy" is, i.e. knowing how to see, know, interpret and criticize a given museum object, and create the necessary mechanisms to identify visitors' levels of museum literacy and promote their skills.
7. Designing, in conjunction with educational and cultural systems, programs for museum literacy, as an integral element of citizen training in the face of the need for a new humanism, helping to make communities stronger, more critical, cohesive, inclusive and diverse, united by consensual notions of rights and duties towards the common good.

To put these suggestions into practice, I propose some measures, which once again, many of you will already be implementing or discussing:

- updating management models, making hierarchical visions compatible with horizontal models and visions of networking.

- continuous training and qualification of all staff working in museums, regardless of their categories and responsibilities, with reference to a common framework of values and objectives;

- valuing the participation of individual volunteers, associations of friends of museums, associations, foundations, companies that have a relationship with the museum at various levels, creating a "museum ecosystem", which corresponds to a "museum community".
- creating models for distributing power between the institution and its users, promoting participatory models, always accompanied by the rigor of technicians and experts and the presence of internal decision-makers.
- technological updating, with the integration of artificial intelligence software, namely in areas such as people management, security, sanitary, humidity and temperature control, collection management, documentation, statistical models, communication, production of audiovisual and interactive media, organization of customized virtual tours.
- promotion of interactive online content, using gamification techniques for educational activities and the preparation and monitoring of physical and virtual visitors.
- definition of common agendas between museums, to improve means and ends.

The suggestions made demonstrate the need to create common competence centers, as it is impossible and undesirable for each museum to promote these measures alone.

In this sense, it would be advisable to create a shared resource center for the design, development and production of artificial intelligence models involving museums and industry. The same could be done in the field of developing 3D visualization instruments, tactile, olfactory and auditory sensing.

It would also be advisable to set up a literacy skills observation center to measure audience skills and promote models that adopt more accessible languages and, at the same time, have a developmental perspective, proactively seeking to improve audience skills.

This center must integrate a strong relationship with formal education systems, accompanying the various levels of education, from pre-school to university education.

It would be advisable to create an online hub of organizational resources and best practices, for museums to share their work and learn from each other, with networks for mutual help, discussion and the promotion of joint solutions to common problems.

- It will be advisable to establish new accessibility paradigms for people with physical and mental limitations in accordance with the latest mobility technologies and other resources that favor positive discrimination.

I've taken up enough of your time, so I'll conclude.

On October 13, 1806, the French army occupied Jena and Napoleon entered the city. That same day, Georg Friedrich Hegel, in a letter to his friend Friedrich Immanuel Niethamer, wrote: "I saw the Emperor - this world-soul - riding out of the city"⁴

Hegel said that Napoleon was, at the time, the spirit of the world on horseback.

Today, we have, right in front of us, the challenge of riding the horse of History and embodying the spirit.

But which spirit? What soul should animate us? What breath makes sense to be inside us, to be shared, to be assembled, transported, powerfully, with the ability to draw, to create History?

Museums have some incredible powers: safeguarding and sharing memory and the excellence of human ingenuity, as well as the ability to generate narratives, feelings of belonging, knowledge and deep emotions. The nobility of their mission and the generation of positive externalities are almost inherent to their existence. However, this status quo is threatened by the massive transition of the contemporary moment. Allow me the following irony: as Tancredi said to Don Fabrizio in *The Leopard*, *If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change*⁵. This quote, however, contrary to the political sense of conservatism, means something else - in order to protect the mission of museums, we need to transform management and action models, namely, openness to the endogenous effects of the community on museum

⁴ *Hegel: The Letters*, translated by Clark Butler and Christine Seiler with commentary by Clark Butler, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, © Purdue Research Foundation.

⁵ Lampedusa, Giuseppe Tomasi di, *Il Gattopardo*, 1958.

organization and the power to generate exogenous effects that contribute to a contemporary Humanism.

The urgent challenge is simple: do we want to consistently and effectively play an active role for the museum system in a world undergoing vast and accelerated transformation, contributing to a new humanist vision of the Present and the Future, or are we simply going to be well-behaved students of conformity and resignation?

Thank you very much.

Brescia, 04.05.25

Jorge Barreto Xavier