

Museological Claims to Autonomous Knowledge: Rethinking the Conceptual Mode of Display and its Claims to Knowledge

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Abstract: *The paper considers museological claims to autonomous knowledge by looking at the conceptual mode of display. Museological representations are still dominated by objects and hierarchies of classical sciences we conclude while the informational content of display in museology and museographic practice is often ignored and not properly assessed.*

Keywords: *Museums, archives, contemporary art, display, conceptual mode of display, knowledge, History.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary perceptions in the collection and display of contemporary art have tended to follow a conceptual mode of display.⁴³ The latter is manifest in the use of an overarching concept, a theme that coincides with an idea, but not necessarily with a distinct category of an object, or indeed a chronologically defined period or sequence of periods, or even a medium, or indeed many media. Such a conceptual approach towards the display of contemporary art becomes also apparent, in addition the acquisition and display policies of Museums of Contemporary art, in the choice of title and themes that many of the contemporary art meetings have followed in recent years.⁴⁴ At the same time however, such a conceptual approach does fall under the broad chronologically defined boundaries of the 'contemporary'.⁴⁵ The display of contemporary art, and its organizational and 'epistemological' premises, in this respect, seems to express a kind of knowledge that is

restricted, or is part of a broader disciplinary domain, here historical knowledge and the domain of contemporary art as the object of Art History.

II. METHODS

If the display of contemporary art, as museum directors and curators suggest, should be taking up the conceptual modality as its privileged logic of display, yet in doing so still is seen to express a broad historically defined domain of knowledge - the object but also period often described by the term contemporary art - the conceptual mode of display articulates a museological claim to knowledge that describes an object and a kind of knowledge that, far from being autonomous, is conditioned by traditional disciplinary practice and domains of knowledge which in our case takes the form of historical via a conceptualized expression of historical periodization. In pragmatic terms, for a museography of the contemporary to work in the context of a museum space, be received, that is, as expressive of the current museological viewpoint and of a scientifically and scholarly legitimate picture of knowledge, the presence of the conceptual mode is a prerequisite, as is also and at the same time, a general reference to the historical context against which objects and stories are placed in the museological exercise of display. In other words, a display of contemporary art has to follow in broad terms the consensually agreed upon chronological period that Art History uses to classify contemporary art as indeed contemporary in historical terms in casting it, in this light, as a historical object. Despite the adherence to chronology however, a display of contemporary art in order to be legible as a display of contemporary art has to denounce or conceal chronology altogether, as the privileging of the conceptual mode of display demonstrates.

In this way, despite the claims to an autonomous museological practice that the conceptual mode might seem to express via a supposedly antihistoricist narrative that it is seen to convey, denotes implicitly and it forms irreducibly an object of art historical discourse that is contingent, as we shall see, on the historiographic tropes of Art History and the History of Contemporary art. While Contemporary Art and its history, as Nikos Daskalothanassis (2004) and Brandon Taylor (2005) have eloquently argued, is often cast in historiography as the direct effect of Conceptual art, this connection carries on, we suggest, in the case of museography and

⁴³ See for example the opening text in the website of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, Greece, written by Anna Kafetsi, the director of the Museum. On account of the Museum's collecting and displaying policies, she notes that the museum collection will present a representative picture of the basic conceptual directions of contemporary art [«Οι συλλογές αυτές θα παρουσιάζουν μία αντιπροσωπευτική εικόνα των βασικών εννοιολογικών κατευθύνσεων της σύγχρονης τέχνης.»]
<http://www.emst.gr/GR/collections/Pages/default.aspx>

⁴⁴ A recent Athens Biennale put together a number of diverse works of art under the title 'Destroy Athens', to quote one example.

⁴⁵ As Kafetsi also points out in the Museum website, *ibid.*

museological practice informed by Art History in the presence and uses of the conceptual mode of display.

In this light, the claim 'new art demands new museographies', a museological claim that is perhaps seen as articulating the ability of museological practice to distinguish itself from disciplinary fields, emphasizing on the objects and their materiality instead, should be reconsidered. Far from asserting the autonomy of museology to disciplinary thinking and objects, it reinstates its contingency, on the contrary, on traditional disciplinary domains to which the material under presentation appears in the form of public display.

It is precisely the public aspect of display, a central element of museological practice and theory, that is perhaps connected to the inability of museology to emancipate itself from classical sciences and disciplines which are often the context which visitors expect to condition and ascribe meaning to an exhibition. A characteristic example in this light is the exhibition, but above all its reception, of '90 years General State Archives', organized by Georgios Giannakopoulos (2004) and curated by Evridiki Retsila (2004). This exhibition used a thematic conceptual scheme for the presentation of the archival material held in the General State Archives in subunits narrating stories under chronological order and was inspired by a definition of the Archive as an 'Arc of memory' proposed by Georgios Giannakopoulos. The exhibition was open to the general public, a highly successful event and well attended. At the level of reception however, a certain ambiguity emerged on behalf of the visitors as to the key theme, memory, through which many different sets of data and archival material were presented to the public in chronological order. The strong references to the idea of History that archives often resonate in particular in the public imaginary, as well as the modern design of the exhibition, using untraditional and unconventional means of display for this type of material such as the more temporary cardboard panels, are two of the factors that Giannakopoulos associates with some of the negative responses from the public to the museography of the exhibition. Both the use of a concept that does not make direct links to the discipline of History to which archival documents are often seen as records, as well as the modern design seem to have clashed with the 'historical' content and objects of the exhibition in the public eye. The main conclusion that emerges from the study of its reception here as well concerns the seemingly incompatible ways, in the audience's eyes, that characterized the layout of the exhibition, a modern layout and design, to the material content, historical material, and its claims to knowledge as objects of History. As Giannakopoulos emphasizes, the audience felt that the design and the presentation did not meet the museological style of thinking which historical objects such as archival material are definitely seen to be are often presented in the context and primarily as permanent display. The strong chronological orientation reminiscent of historical

method in many traditional displays of archival material here was not readily evident in the use of overarching conceptual categories which organized the material and brought coherence to the display, such as memory itself. While History and historical method certainly extends chronology and a strictly linear narration, both in writing and display, today, what this case of reception in the given exhibition shows, is that museological practice and museography is still accessed, at least in the public eyes, not independently, as an information science and as an organizational discipline and technology. On the contrary, it is still assessed by recourse to the specific and distinct disciplinary domains to which the objects it is set to organize and present are seen to fall under in the public eyes; in this case History and a rather narrow methodologically perception of history that is associated almost exclusively to the idea of chronological, linear narration. Such an understanding of museological practice and museographic techniques, as far as this case in reception shows, tend to dominate broader perceptions of museological practice as far as display is concerned, a fact not least unrelated to the strong links between the idea and technique of display and the idea of public representation; in other words a kind of thinking that equates the museographic object of knowledge with the idea of an irreducibly 'public' object. This irreducibly 'public' aspect of museology and museological practice, as far as display is concerned, could be seen in turn as responsible for the discipline's inability to overcome strict hierarchical structures concerned with the division of disciplinary domains in classical sciences and traditional scholarship.

III. CONCLUSIONS

It is perhaps due to this switch towards the idea of the public, and museological display as a kind of knowledge that is directed towards a 'public' and is thought of as irreducibly 'public', that explains museological practices' failure to emancipate themselves from the status of tools and develop towards the direction of a discipline that may claim and create its own discourses and also objects. Its isolation and fragmentation in areas of research increasingly concerned with the public and visitors is also connected to this turn. On the other hand, a vigorous epistemological and methodological discourse is often absent from many museological studies that are with a few exceptions case studies of applied museological concerns as opposed to questions and theory driven papers and discussions. The introduction of information science in museum studies is perhaps a case for consideration that opens up possibilities also in theoretical discourse for the reevaluation of museological practice as epistemologically specific practice where its ability to disseminate and redistribute informational content may be given adequate justice. The kind of knowledge that an exhibition is or leads to remains unanswered today. Certainly though it is a question that might be used to reconsider the place of

information and knowledge in museological practice as far as its relation to domains of knowledge often cast only against preconceived dominant hierarchies, fixed against conventional disciplinary division. Being an exercise in methodology the latter may also work as an experiment in reflexivity. For the case of museological practice as applied to the question of display and museography, an answer to the above question presupposes many issues to be considered and resolved at the level of disciplinary thinking and within the context of each one's own discipline. To consider museological claims to autonomous knowledge and their viability we have to think first of the methodological issues that surround the place and role of objects, material and epistemological, in each given discipline and as far as their meanings and uses are concerned in and out of each discipline. To do so, as the example of Contemporary art and the given exhibition discussed here show, we have to engage first with the historiographic premises on which museography often builds and with which it is often entangled. To consider museology as a new discipline and the stories display, in the context of museological practice produces, as objects, we need to consider display against theoretical tools that emphasize knowledge and knowledge of historiography, in particular, for the examples discussed. If exhibitions, like History, tell stories, to think such stories as the object of display we have to consider them in a new light that is not autonomous to but contingent on historiographic and methodological practice; museology's way to emancipation has to go through critical thinking.

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