

REMEMBERING THE PRESENCE. POSSIBLE ROLES OF THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART TODAY

Peter J. Schneemann¹

LEMBRANDO A PRESENÇA. PAPÉIS POSSÍVEIS DO MUSEU DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA HOJE

RESUMO

Esse ensaio procura refletir sobre a maneira através da qual os museus de arte contemporânea tem lidado com proposições artísticas processuais, pelo menos desde a década de 1970, e como elas podem ser reapresentadas e/ou exibidas. Mais do que isso, procuramos discutir as práticas que os museus de arte contemporânea encontraram para reexibir tais proposições, uma vez que não se trata apenas de apresentar, mas de ativar e reencenar. Tal aspecto levanta questões, não só sobre os modos de documentação e exibição desses trabalhos, mas também o que é esperado do conceito de museu, bem como do que se entende pelo espectador delas, isto é, o público do museu.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Museus, arte contemporânea, documentação museológica

ABSTRACT

This essay is a critical analysis of the way contemporary art museums have been dealing with proposals made by contemporary artists, since at least the 1970s, and how they are restaged. Moreover, we try to discuss the practices museums of contemporary art have found to reexhibit such works, as they are to be activated and performed. Such aspect raises not only issues of documentation and display, but also what is expected of the concept of museum, as well as the notion of the beholder, the museum's visitor.

KEYWORDS

museums, contemporary; museological documentation

¹ Art historian and Director of the Chair for the History of Contemporary Art, University of Bern, Switzerland since 2001. Among various publications in his field of interest, Professor Schneemann has recently been one of the organizers of the Conference reevaluating the museum of contemporary art, which resulted in the publication *Now-Tomorrow-Flux. An Anthology on the Museum of Contemporary Art* (2017).

Introduction

Yes, indeed, art has to take place, has to be activated and performed. The perception and the evaluation of art, its power and potential may be perceived as a social collective act. Such a starting point may lead to affirm a current development in which the exhibition, the event, the festival dominates the art world.

At the same time the museums enlarge, extend and seem to win the competitive question, of whether this old institution would reach at one point the limit to incorporate all movements and articulations of art. How many times did we think of diagnosing an incompatibility between new media, new focuses of process oriented art, on the one hand, with the idea of object-based ownership, on the other? How often did we think to be confronted with a work of a scale and a weight that no institutional interior could house? Well, when power-stations and monumental cathedrals of the former industrial notion of productions are taken over by institutions of cultural preservation this limit is pushed even further. The money and effort invested for the conservation of contemporary art surpasses the investments necessary for the old masters by far (GRASSKAMP, 2015; HUMMELEN/ SILLÉ, 1999; CORZO, 1999). That museums keep their established mission statements by voting for an exclusive collection of stable materiality only, seems to be equally absurd.

In clear contradiction to all commitments to the ephemeral the conserving imperative of the museum seems unaltered. The contradictions and dilemmas are countless, while many authors reflect on the end of the centuries of collecting, and even suggests strategies of de-collecting, museums of contemporary art still expand. Private collectors alike seem to test ownership as an alternative access to understanding art.

Nevertheless, or especially in the light of this development the presentation of the collections of contemporary art beyond temporary exhibitions seems to me an issue necessary to discuss. What kind of “perception paradigms” or “modalities of spectatorship” (BISHOP, 2013) are we able to imagine?

Transfers

While the format of the exhibition has gone through a remarkable phase of self-reflection and the development of experimental modes, driven by close collaborations between artists and curators, the paradigms in the handling of permanent collections did not see much of radical re-readings.

We still recognize the dominance of well-balanced architectural spaces, the control of climate and light. The belief in a certain canon, the authority of a selection based on the notion of the masterpiece, complete and well preserved, becomes even adopted by institutions who once started as alternative spaces.

Of course, this is nothing less than a polemical simplification. However, the tension between the expansions of artistic practices since the middle of the last century still seem to face nothing less than radical mechanisms of complete neutralization. When the MoMA started to include time-based art into their display only recently, the model of the permanent collection with its well established modes of display basically stayed unquestioned. The implications of the transfer of art into the museum space as a space that unfolds a specific rhetoric are well-known and are subject of many discourses.

How do we want to discuss this process, with regard to artistic practices that address this rule system? I do not only speak of institutional critique, but in a more general sense of art that situated itself in a specific moment, in terms

of ephemeral materiality, immateriality and processes. How do we negotiate the transfer as moment of transition in regard to modes of perception, of experience and understanding?

We have to state, I think, that there is no way around the acknowledgement of two very different constellations, two systemic devices, altogether:

On the one hand, in the context of an exhibition, the public may participate in the collective production of an artwork (Becker, 1974). The public shares with the artwork a specific context in a cultural history. The confrontation between artistic gesture and perceiving audience may lead towards appreciation or rejection – in both cases this interaction is happening, so to speak, “in real-time”. The act of viewing, the behavior of the audience might be convincingly described as being part of an artistic piece.

On the other hand, in the context of a permanent collection, process-driven art, performance, and participatory projects mark a situation of loss, of unresolved promise. Is the remaining materiality anything more than a leftover, a trace or just a documentation that demonstrates a shortfall? The situation turns into something historic, the material evidence turns into the fetish of the art market. Instead of the powerful presence of the artist as author, appearing not only as performer but also as stage director, priest, victim or agitator, we are confronted with framed black-and-white photographs.

The museum of contemporary art has to address this shift that takes place when the rhetoric of the collection tries to take over – not only in terms of the original artistic intention, but much more in terms of the conceptualization of the beholder. What happens to the idea of direct impact, unintermediateness, the emotional density of the encounter, which is part of contemporaneity? (GUMBRECHT, 2004).

In the tradition of hermeneutical discourse, there is the model of a constant “selbstvermittlung”, self-mediation, auto-mediation of art. The decontextualized artwork would have the intrinsic quality to address the perceiver and create “presentness”. Hans Georg Gadamer already developed this idea of self-evidence, a process that could take place every time anew, regardless of the historical distance between production and perception (GADAMER, 1990 (1960)). In the middle of the 20th century an institution like the Museum of Modern Art tried to promote the model of an evaluation of art that would be detached from its contemporaneity (Timeless Aspects of Modern Art November 16, 1948–January 23, 1949).

One has to stress the fact that this model was based on the aesthetic, social, political, historical isolation of the objects that would be re-contextualized into the artificial historiography of the museum (KEMP, 1991). This formalistic approach was the basis to the idea of an “open artwork” and fostered the empowerment of the beholder, his individual “horizon” and experience (ECO, 1962).

What happens now, when the object of contemporary art is no longer to be conceived as self-contained and self-referential but as a secondary product, a by-product of a meaningful gesture, of a past situation? What happens when the production of collectible objects as commodity is rejected altogether, as in the case of Tino Sehgal? Has a pure abstract concept the same potential to reproduce its meaning? Most commonly the trace or the documentation are perceived as something that could not serve the qualities described in models of immanence. The documentary approach that is used to handle artistic strategies beyond the primary focus on the art object seems to indicate a contradiction. The referential character, the second-degree representation dominates.

Mediated Presence or Situations

Which ways are possible to imagine solving this issue? We could, of course, vote for a radical denial of the modernist de-contextualization and the focus on the aesthetic, enigmatic object. We could refer to models well established in museums of history or ethnography that are aiming at a recreation of an “authentic” setting. Museum scenography promises environments that can recreate an atmospheric experience. And new media systems do offer the possibility to integrate next to the material evidence additional information.

What we do witness, indeed, is the development towards a culture of the secondary order. The presented evidence to a radical gesture or to a site-specific intervention aims at informing us about a historical and social moment. Even within the culture of exhibition there is the tendency of exhibitions on exhibitions, the restaging of canonical shows (BISMARCK, 2016, CELANT, 2013).

The museum of contemporary art has to be reconsidered in this very culture of re-staging, re-enactment and re-construction. The institutions with a mission statement based on contemporaneity discover proudly their archives and artists perform artistic research in focusing on these. The question is, whether we have to mourn this loss of “presentness”, or enter a sharp polemic or even proclaim the end of the museum.

I suggest, however, reconsidering these developments as something productive and highly complex. The current situation does pose questions that are not only highly relevant with regard to historiography and our attitude towards contemporaneity but also with regard to the challenge of the global in the arts. The “now”, as complete synchrony, as well as the “here” as local unity, are the two axioms that are challenged. The museum’s future will demand a strong self-reflective mode, and this mode implies certain modesty. Whereas the old concept of the universal museum was by definition a demonstration of power, the power to embrace all times and all regions, the new museum knows its limits and has to understand itself as contact-zone.

The fragment of a bigger piece, the anecdote about an absent place leads to a fundamental reflection of the beholder about cultural techniques to access the world. Memory and the handling of fragments belong to this moment. We accept the fact that we do not have the exclusive and total availability of an artistic work, in its entirety, as an original and pure expression.

Instead, we can enter a variety of processes of recuperation, rearrangements, and transcriptions. The museum has to prove itself capable to serve as training ground of anagrammatic operations that go beyond the claim for the one and only original as unique unity.

These operations are informed by the past activities of perception and its documentation, the effects they caused. The scandals we heard about. Our perception does not only look at the labeled museum piece, but does recall the variety of situations that have led to the things we see. Narrations in terms of ekphrasis and the anecdote, significantly come as moments of a reflective perception back into discourse (SCHNEEMANN, 2007).

We are informed about past moments of effect of a work of art and try to re-experience them. In a hermeneutical sense, the history of a loss turns into a constellation, in which the artistic gesture gets highly enriched by its own afterlife that may produce a variety of material formats.

We should take artists into account that do demonstrate such a re-evaluation of fragment and copy. The examples are countless. One might think of

the displays created by Mark Leckey and his use of 3D scans and 3D printouts. Another prominent example is Danh Vo and his project of the copy of the statue of liberty. “We the people” (2010-2014) contains more than 400 parts of a 1:1 replica of the famous monument – scattered around the world- to be perceived as incomplete pieces. In his acclaimed show “Slip of the Tongue” that has been organized in 2015 at the Dogana in Venice, he demonstrated an approach to the history, the life of collected objects, by operations of memory and narration that suggest multiple temporalities. Quite a number of contemporary artists that do not belong to one movement or school share their interest in the possibility to work with different “aggregate states” of their works – interlinking it with multi-temporal situations of perception.

The museum thus does not have to reconstruct an original situation but puts on display the elements of a narration, the success and misunderstandings of a concept in its materialized traces, the agency of these traces. One might be tempted to speak of a museum “of secondary order” as Hans Fehr did (FEHR, 2000). I would like to stress, however, that the “museum dispositive” has the fascinating power to deconstruct any clear chronology by being open to the variety of formats of a work.

When we talk about a performance, for example, and its documentation, we think of a clear hierarchy, an evaluation deduced from a clear concept of chronological order. We like to think of a work in terms of a logic sequence of steps, leading to a final work. The status of these steps are mirrored by the attitude towards the moment we perceive. The black and white pictures seem to be nothing more than an incomplete reminder, the object used in the performance appears as a strange leftover. We have, however, to question this one-dimensional reading. In a number of recent presentations of the legendary “Werkstanz” by Franz Erhard Walther (WALTHER, 1968) one could observe the presentations of an astonishing variety of evidence being on display next to each other and demonstrating a multitude of possibilities to access the work. These “evidences”, as I may call them, were all fragments of a past reality and could be used to develop a multi-layered new appreciation. Instead of a clear historical narration we face ruptures and anachronic structures.

We can start by looking at the carefully crafted scores and notations, instructions and text-drawings, we may also concentrate on the sequences of black-and-white photographs, showing historical performances. Which visual evidence is better, the one showing the artist him/herself in action or the one documenting the historical audience following the instructions? Well, we can also concentrate on the objects themselves, the pieces of cloth, seemingly simple, beautiful and sensual. Walther offered aesthetical intriguing pictures of them, but we can turn as well to the “real ones”, now in a vitrine, developing an aura of a relic in the religious sense, much more than a simple relict as a leftover. And of course we may touch the exhibition-copies. We can start to perform ourselves but we may also observe the others, taking pictures of them – comparing these with the pictures the instructors have in their hands. My point is that none of these approaches might be considered as the initial one, the better one, the only one.

Criticality

I would like to come back to my starting point. The success and rise of the museum of contemporary art has lead to some serious concerns. The rather general claim, that powerful collectors, the mechanisms of the art market or

the total global mobility would dominate and destroy the museum as epistemic potential, leads to quite a fundamental questioning of the implications of contemporaneity as a situation in which artwork and beholder meet (BISHOP, 2015). I am strongly convinced that in the experience of anachronic ruptures and of fragmentation criticality is inherent. The perception of situations that is informed by “impure” references, subtexts and narrations lead to a new and richer contextuality. The museum presents art not only as a self-referential but self-reflexive quality.

The museum has a strong tradition in looking at artistic strategies in order to reform itself. Many coffee-table books and exhibitions collected the artistic investigation into “Wunderkammer” and encyclopedic systems (Museum as Muse, 1999). The current question addresses issues of power and representational rhetoric by addressing time and multilayered narratives of perception, preservation, and reconstruction. Instead of calling again for the museum as mediator of “eternal values” (FUNCKE, 2017) and instead of denouncing the contemporary in total, the museum is able to address complex anachronic situations, in which the latent issue of narration and memory negotiates the future by imagining the present.

There are many reasons to claim a “post-museum era” (WYSS, 2017). And many suggestions have been made to change the labeling, to renew the typology of art institutions: “Schausammlung” (Basel), Arena or Laboratory and so on. More important than a name that would imply again a homogenous and closed rule system seems something else. We can agree on an art institution that understands itself as a training-ground for accessing the world today. The probing, failing, misunderstanding includes intellectual readings, as well as sensual modes of embodiment and empathy. By experiencing and reflecting the limitations of the promise of total accessibility the museum incorporates criticality (MURAWSKA-MUTHESIUS, 2015).

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