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Editore

eum edizioni università di macerata, Centro direzionale, via Carducci 63/a - 62100 Macerata

tel (39) 733 258 6081

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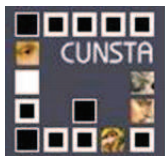
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Sustainability in modern art museums. Management challenges and cultural policies

Irene Campolmi*

Abstract

The paper analyzes the concept of sustainability in European governmental museum policies. It takes into consideration great modern art museums, particularly Tate Modern. On the one hand, the issue of sustainability is linked to art museums inasmuch these institutions operate for the sustainable common good of the community. On the other hand, it is considered from the so called “three bottom” approach as also corporations and business companies have approached it. In a so called “three bottom” approach, museums’ pursuit for environmental, economic and social sustainability is related to their eligibility for funding and it is indeed an economic rather than a cultural issue. Though, modern art museums’ sustainability relies not only in developing economic and environmental strategies

* Irene Campolmi, PhD Candidate, Aarhus University, Graduate School of Arts, Department of Art, Literature and Cultural Studies, Langelandsgade, 141, Building 1586, DK-8000 Aarhus C, e-mail: campolmi@hum.au.dk.

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but mostly in creating cultural policies that favor art museums in accomplishing same tasks but from different curatorial and managerial perspectives. A long-term sustainable museum model steps beyond Foucault's notion that art museums are "heterotopy", i.e. spaces that present art as an alternative phenomenon outside reality. On the contrary, a sustainable model for museums acts as "archètopy", i.e. a space (*tòpos*) where decisions, narratives, meanings involve practitioners, beholders, curators and trustees since the tenet (*archè*) of the creation process.

Il *paper* analizza il concetto di sostenibilità nelle politiche governative dei musei d'arte. Lo studio osserva tale valore da un punto di vista sia teorico che pratico e cita l'esempio dei grandi musei europei, facendo più volte riferimento al caso della Tate Modern di Londra. Se da un lato l'argomento è esplicitamente collegato ai musei d'arte in quanto essi operano per la sostenibilità del bene comune, dall'altro i musei europei hanno basato le proprie politiche culturali adottando il così detto approccio "*three bottom*" già intrapreso dalle grandi aziende e dalle *business companies*. Tale approccio si basa sull'elaborazione di politiche attente alla sostenibilità ambientale, economica e sociale che i musei scelgono di adottare per incrementare i propri finanziamenti. Ne risulta che l'attenzione alla sostenibilità delle politiche governative di un museo è legata a questioni economiche piuttosto che culturali. Tuttavia, la sostenibilità delle politiche culturali nei musei d'arte moderna risiede non solo nel seguire strategie economiche e ambientali, ma principalmente nel creare iniziative che offrano nuove prospettive curatoriali e idee manageriali. Il modello di museo attento alla sostenibilità delle proprie politiche oltrepassa la nozione foucauldiana che il museo d'arte sia "eterotopia", e cioè spazio dove l'arte viene presentata come un fenomeno che accade lontano dalla realtà. Al contrario, tale modello agisce come "archetopia", ovvero come luogo in cui l'elaborazione di decisioni, narrative e significati legati alla collezione e alla storia dell'arte coinvolge tutti gli *stakeholders* (curatori, visitatori e *trustees*) sin dal principio (*archè*) del processo creativo.

One holds on sustainability when nothing else
holds any longer¹.
(Johachim Heinrich Campe)

1. *Introduction: art museums and the culture of sustainability*

In times of economic crises and market turbulences as those experienced in 2008, European modern art museums have developed complex business models based on long-term strategies that have made the museum sector less vulnerable. More than other institutions, art museums have experienced the need of structural and administrative transformations to ensure their survival and sustainability in a future scenario constantly subject to changes. In the last

¹ Campe 1809, cit. in Grober 2012, p. 9.

ten years, museums have modified mission, perspectives and functions to face a more challenging cultural environment. At the same time, to be competitive against the increasing presence and pressure of business companies models, art museums have emphasized on fundraising, financial management, marketing and public relations. Art museums are defined in managerial terms as “effective organizations” and try to positively affect stakeholders’ life².

How modern art museums can positively impact the society? Where do they find present and future challenges in relation to other cultural institutions, media and events that lay claim to people’s attention? Today the modern art museum is assigned of a special role as a creator of aesthetic experiences, a space of critical reflections and an institution for collective and individual cultivation³. However, how can these characters survive or evolve in the museum of the future, and which strategies should be chosen to measure whether objectives have been achieved or not? To respond to these questions, modern art museums have begun thinking about sustainability as a mean to develop long-term strategic cultural policies. These policies have asked museums flexibility and ability to adapt to new forms of communication, new technologies and new organizational structures. Museum practitioners have acknowledged the need to propose innovative visions, narratives and methodologies that look at modern and contemporary art beyond historical perspectives⁴.

For the purposes of this research that analyzes management and policy challenges, modern art museums are proposed as territories for experiments and innovative practices⁵. Rather than historical galleries or universal museums, modern art museums are prompt to question normative and established exhibition canons, museological contents and museographical display⁶. Likewise for profit-organizations, art museums may succeed creating cultural policies that support shared values and envision future developments⁷. Both European and American modern art museums declare in their charts and websites mission statements that to ensure museums’ sustainability, it is necessary to be more open and receptive to new ideas, as well as discuss different points of view. Museum practitioners want to incite visitors’ criticism and encourage reflective thoughts, practices or debates among people. In many cases, modern art museums have focused on educational programs to cover needs and expectations of a diverse audience and attract more visitors. They have become more entrepreneurial, seeking new partnerships, examining new trends and challenging established current practices as well as traditional beliefs. At the same time, modern art museums have proved to be social agents and establish

² Griffin, Abraham 2007.

³ Hansen 2011.

⁴ Mansfield 2007.

⁵ Maricola 2006; MacLeod *et al.* 2012.

⁶ Greenberg *et al.* 1996, pp. 175-190.

⁷ Collins, Porras 1994, 1996.

productive collaborations with other institutions. Will these characteristics survive and be sustainable in the near future?

Up to now, sustainability in art museums has been addressed from the so-called “three bottom approach” which considers how institutions might be economically, environmentally and socially self-sustainable. Though, the idea of sustainability implies not only meeting and maximizing needs but also creating behaviors that become a sort of political attitude for the multitude⁸. Sustainability is an engaging value demanding to people to engender in reflective and responsible practices and enable changes. Scholars such as Nick Merriman⁹ from the University of Manchester, the Canadian independent researcher Douglas Worts¹⁰ and the museum entrepreneur Rachel Madan¹¹ have approached this issue convinced that museums play a fundamental role in fostering a “culture of sustainability” across society.

Notwithstanding, it is fundamental to clearly identify and outline conditions, objectives and goals that this issue incites in modern art museums. From the perspective of non-profit organizations, questions about cultural values and behaviors characterizing our *Zeitgeist* are deeply rooted in human patterns of consumption and stand as major cultural forces nowadays¹². Much has been done since the early 21st century to face “green-wash” issues in the management and administration of museums. Museums have promoted managerial strategies and practices to lower costs and consumption, avoid energy wasting and recycle materials from past exhibitions¹³. A perfect example was represented by a group of museums practitioners in the Netherlands, which in 2010 launched a web project called *Museumplaats* to encourage the staff of Dutch museums in reusing past exhibition equipment buying it through eBay auctions¹⁴. Similarly, in 2008, the UK Museum Association (MA) held a forum entitled *Sustainability and Museums* to discuss how UK National Museums could improve their environmental, economic and social sustainability policy. Afterwards, a *Sustainability Checklist* was published as helpful handout for museum directors, staff and curators and spurred the creation of sustainable strategies and

⁸ Parr 2009, pp. 3-12.

⁹ Merriman 2008.

¹⁰ Worts 2010.

¹¹ Madan 2011. As the owner of a museum consulting business, Greener Museums, Madan helps cultural organizations to save money by improving operational efficiencies, primarily through waste reduction and the smarter use of energy.

¹² Janes 2009.

¹³ Cassar 1995.

¹⁴ Some years ago, a group of museum professionals in the Netherlands noticed that many materials were being used only once and decided to react. Up until then, display cabinets and exhibition frames were thrown away after exhibitions. In reaction to this, they created a website where all Dutch museums can log on and present surplus material and objects. The website functions similarly to eBay and operates quite successfully. From the start, the Netherlands Museums Association has recommended the online platform to its members (<www.museumplaats.nl>), and it recently received a grant to further develop this *Museumplaats*.

practices in museum management. Checklist questions explored whether and to what extent museums staff members were required to account for sustainability in day-to-day decision-making processes, and if producing developments and monitoring progresses were team or individual responsibilities¹⁵. However, the actual innovation was acknowledging that staff members wanted to commit themselves to new managerial strategies that would help proposing different displays, contents and interpretations¹⁶. The British case studies presented by the MA report demonstrated the effectiveness of such recommendations and action plans¹⁷. The “three bottom approach” art museums have undertaken was inspired by business corporations and energy industries. In the last ten years, leading firms such as Unilever¹⁸, McKinsey¹⁹, Bloomberg²⁰ and GE²¹ have strategically drafted and adopted “sustainability charts” to “green-wash” their mission, change strategy and prove accountability in their investing behaviors. Their approach to sustainability has served as a mean to develop long-term business models and enforce long-lasting management structures. Preserving but also creating culture makes museums’ core mission different from that of any other media, cultural institutions, commercial businesses and industrial firms. Thus, modern art museums should first address sustainability as framework to produce cultural contents and display legitimate visions about the arts and the social, economic and environmental “hot topics” of our society²².

2. Art museums’ approaches to sustainability: green practices, networking, brand-franchising and money saving

In the late 1990s, the unlimited growth type of museum scenario has tended to prevail and has led to the great expansion of museums during the 1980s and 1990s. The major investments pumped into museums and their relative popularity did not prove to guarantee their sustainability and continuous

¹⁵ Museums Association 2008, pp.1-14.

¹⁶ See the UK MA website: <<http://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/sustainability/principles-for-sustainable-museums>>.

¹⁷ In the period 2008-2010, the UK MA encouraged several museums to apply principles of sustainability to their own working environment. All the case studies are listed on the MA website: <<http://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/sustainability/sustainability-case-studies>>. These include the Gibson Mill, the Museum of East Anglian Life, Killhope Mining Museum, the National Maritime Museum “Your Ocean”, the Banbury Museum and the Manchester Museum.

¹⁸ <http://www.unilever.com/images/USLP-Progress-Report-2012-FI_tcm13-352007.pdf>.

¹⁹ <http://www.mckinsey.com/client_service/sustainability/latest_thinking/mckinsey_on_sustainability>.

²⁰ <<http://www.bloomberg.com/bsustainable/>>.

²¹ <<http://www.ge-ip.com/library/detail/12024>>.

²² Cameron, Kelly 2010.

development. The way in which museums operated was challenged particularly by new technologies and entertainment businesses. The emergence of new information and communication technologies during the 1990s marked a radical turning point in the way in which we (as a western society) read images, with many wondering whether museums could survive the shock of the advent of the Internet and the digital era²³. In recent years, society compulsive hoarding and consumption have encouraged the feeling of an unlimited museum growth, on which global economy was also based. Recent economic crisis – such as the one in 2008 – and environmental warnings were also an invitation to revise museum collection managerial strategies from different angles.

As far as we have imagined a “de-growth” economy²⁴, it is not unreasonable to consider a “de-growth” of museums’ boost²⁵. The sustainability of museums’ governing policy raises, in fact, questions about collection management and principles of accumulation. As acknowledged by museum management scholars²⁶, museums’ collections tend to grow on an average of 1-2% per year. Beside this general principle of accumulation, there is also the fact that the techniques for preserving and conserving collections have become increasingly expensive and collections’ boost has to be downsized. Certainly, museums need to improve and grow in order to be flexible, open and update practices and narratives in relation to present and future challenges. If museums would stop to collect new artworks and enlarge their collections, will they ensure their sustainability and impact the future scenario? Most probably they will not. Thus, the utility of sustainability mind-frame is to incite rethinking about patterns of consumption and current practices, modes of operation and managerial organization. Despite rhetoric, European art museums networks as well as international associations (AAC, ICOM) have effectively explored the implications of practical approaches to sustainability. They have strengthened on the opportunities provided by creating networks with other museums, cultural institutions and commercial businesses²⁷. These networks aim at allowing museums to be sustainable from environmental, economic and social perspectives. Pioneering attempts to join forces and create forums for discussion and exchange have brought to draft reports such as *Collections for the Future*²⁸ and guides to collection planning. The launch of the Internet has given these collaborations a tremendous boost. The web 2.0, in fact, operates largely on the basis of highly advanced participatory elements and individual surfers can participate to social intelligence generated by crowd sources. While reflecting on pragmatic applications of cultural sustainability in art museums,

²³ Deloche 2007.

²⁴ Georgescu-Rogen 1971; Latouche 2003.

²⁵ Mairesse 2005.

²⁶ Lord *et al.* 1989.

²⁷ Petterson *et al.* 2005.

²⁸ Museum Association 2005.

European institutions have also built new partnerships – such as *Collection Mobility*, NEMO (Network of European Museum Organizations) or European Registrars Group – that establish standardized criteria for the conduction of daily operations²⁹. These partnerships have encouraged cooperation between different and heterogeneous museums in Europe and have enhanced trust and reliability among the staff working within these institutions. On the one hand, they have favored museums in accomplishing daily procedures by avoiding the payment of fees when loaning artworks to other partner institutions, recycling the exhibition display materials (panels, labels, light) and drafting regulations and ethical codes for the conduction of daily operations³⁰. On the other hand, they have started measuring their economic performance to prove accountability in spending public money³¹. Thus, sustainability has also served as a framework to clarify and better articulate the long-term impact and importance of the different outcomes produced by art museums³². To cut down costs of collection preservation and strive to achieve shared practices in collection management, museums networks have defined long-term strategies to create a rational for conservation, use and management of collections³³.

As acknowledged by Mairesse and the *Encouraging Collection Mobility*'s authors, in perspective of a global management of collections, it is necessary to develop shared “sustainable” practices. Sustainable management practices are based on principles of disposal and flexibility, and works particularly well in countries such as Great Britain, the Netherlands and the USA. At the same time, these practices include decentralizing portions of the collection from central museums to suburban branches. Big museums such as the Louvre, the Guggenheim, the Centre Pompidou and Tate Gallery have embarked in brand-franchising policies either in all the four corners of the earth (such as the case of the Guggenheim museums) or within national borders (likewise Tate Galleries' collections which are divided between Tate St Ives, Tate Liverpool and Tate Modern, or the Centre Pompidou and its provincial branch in Metz, or the Louvre and Lens). This collection strategy suits only art museums of considerable dimensions whose collections are not strictly connected to the local territory and it is anyway highly controversial. Certainly, as a policy is economically and socially sustainable and enables museums to save high costs of maintenance while attracting more people to see and experience artworks usually stored inside depositories. Though, it exposes objects to preservation risks due to frequent travels, and changes of display environment and climate. For certain economists and politicians, this strategy is a social opportunity to

²⁹ Petterson *et al.* 2005.

³⁰ Network of European Museum Association, German Museums Association 2010, pp. 2-5.

³¹ Scott 2002, p. 41.

³² Weil 1997.

³³ Merrit 2008, p. 17.

valorize underused collections³⁴. However, it mines the conservation of objects that is traditionally a leading strategy for museums.

3. Framing museums sustainability leadership. Sustainability policies at Tate Galleries

As reported by the 2012 *Sustainability Leadership Report* conducted by the consultant society Brandlogic³⁵, sustainability performances depend on strong leadership but also effective communication. Sustainability leadership consists in a combination of environmental stewardship, social responsibility and corporate governance and it is usually considered within “ESG” (Environment, Social, Governance) matrixes. The report accounts that real performances and stakeholder perceptions are key factors for sustainability strategies. In order to be successful, companies should create communicative brands to attract “highly attentive” audience that may make critical decisions based on sustainability perceptions. Among hundred business companies analyzed in the study, there are big firms such as GE, SAS, UPS, Deutsche Bank, Facebook, MacDonald, Coca Cola, Dell and many others. Businesses are classified in four categories: leaders, challengers, promoters and laggards³⁶. Briefly, while leader companies keep high levels of real and perceived ESG performances, challengers’ real ESG results are above their perceived performance. Differently, promoter companies hold high perceived performances whereas their actual ESG results are at risk if investments to improve their real performance are not done. Finally, laggard companies hold real and perceived performances below the average standard and are vulnerable to erosion of market share as competitors raise the bar for acceptable performance.

Modern art museums sustainability leadership performance can also be analyzed within this matrix, if we wish; however, besides few cases in the UK such as Tate Galleries, modern art institutions are still far from being positioned among the leaders or the challengers of sustainability leadership performances. Surely, they act as “promoters”, inciting sustainability attitudes and behaviors towards collections’ preservation, spurring discussions about social issues, equity and inclusiveness and promoting green practices to save costs in daily operations. However, from a cultural perspective, they are still far from performing a sustainability leadership which harmonizes their actions and mission statements.

³⁴ Levy, Jouyet 2006.

³⁵ Brandlogic 2012, pp. 1-20. Available on the web: <<http://www.sustainabilityleadershipreport.com/>>.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

Certainly, among the European modern art museums, Tate Galleries are leading promoters of sustainable economic, environmental, social and cultural policies³⁷. To ensure additional funding besides those publicly provided by the national lottery, for example, Tate Modern grants its economic stability promoting corporative sponsorships with business corporations such as Unilever, Bloomberg, McKinsey or British Land. Among the sponsorship proposals advertised on its website, there are options that go from a multi-strand partnership to a brand-building solution. The latter, for instance, was chosen by Unilever when in 2000 it started financing the Turbine Hall projects. Corporations can also opt for a business-to-business or a staff incentives sponsorship. McKinsey Company and Vodafone have both embraced these solutions to offer free tours, special openings and bookshops' or restaurant's discounts not only to their clients, but mostly to their personnel and staff members. These kinds of sponsorships incite museums to be creative and foster collaborative strategies while also developing innovative cultural initiatives that emphasize the museum global outlook and long-term binding policies. Tate Galleries have also promoted sustainability policies decentralizing the collection in separate braches to revitalize British cities (such as Liverpool) or locations (St Ives or London Bankside) with architectural projects and new touristic and commercial activities. Recently, they have also started building networks between them and the national British museums to give practical answers to the global collection management.

4. *What does sustainability mean in contemporary museology?*

Sustainability is a value that interests many diverse and heterogeneous stakeholders. Museums architects and designers look at its application from an environmental perspective to build museums and create displays respectful of the environment. Financers, trustees, members and commercial business companies consider the economic implications of sustainability and measure whether museums' outputs accomplish final outcomes. Non-profit associations, NGOs, cultural enterprises, schools and politicians have also joined the cause that art museums can foster social sustainability³⁸. However, practitioners, directors, curators have hardly ever defined which challenges or characteristics may ensure museums' survival and future sustainability. Sustainability influences museums' cultural policies and encourages practitioners to rethink about museums' communication and relationships of power. Self-criticism, transparency and

³⁷ Tate Modern website: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/tate-research/research-centres/art-museum-and-its-future>>.

³⁸ Simon 2010.

accountability are values frequently linked to the concept of sustainability either from economic, social and environmental perspectives. From financial perspectives, modern art museums strive to be sustainable fundraising through private campaigns, organizing collateral events, hosting gala dinners or adding additional services. They offer programs that aim at including huger audiences while also proposing differentiated cultural initiatives that may be far from exhibiting artworks.

Currently, museums practitioners feel an existing mismatch between what modern art museums' rhetoric recommends and what staff members can actually do according to mission statements. While participating in interviews, attending scientific conferences or contributing to journals with articles, museums' practitioners constantly underline the importance of improving sustainability strategies that ensure collective decision-making, institutional accountability and governmental responsibility³⁹. Despite rhetoric, practitioners are aware that there is much to be done, and that art museums are still reticent in challenging the ways they produce meanings and cultural trends by displaying art. Modern art museums' curatorial choices rely on decisions and trends dictated by the art system. Even Bruno Latour has admitted that, nowadays, modern art museums transport meanings by means of exhibitions and educational activities, though, hardly ever, they transform the social system⁴⁰. Thus, the greatest challenge of 21st century modern art museums is not to focus so much on updating displays or developing alternative narratives, but rather on creating the premises for working environments, where practitioners can effectively accomplish their job according to the institutions' mission and philosophy. Changing or at least questioning modern art museums' practices may modify narratives, displays as well as the organization of exhibitions, cultural events and educational activities.

To ensure modern art museums sustainability, curators and educators shall develop alternative practices for the creation of narratives which may open to museums unexplored scenarios. In such a way, the modern art museum will step back the position of being *heterotopy*⁴¹, i.e. a space where art is presented as a phenomenon that takes place outside of reality, and, on the contrary, it will act as *archètopy*, i.e. a place (*tòpos*) for individual and collective cultivation where the creation of meanings and narratives involve practitioners and beholders since the tenet (*archè*) of the creation processes. These changes might take place only if in museums' management practitioners, curators, educators and museum administrative staff will be assigned of different tasks and responsibilities.

³⁹ Scott 2002; MacLeod *et al.* 2012; Macalik 2013.

⁴⁰ Latour 2005.

⁴¹ Foucault 1984.

5. Archètopy: *the sustainable art museum model*

In order to achieve a position as leaders or challengers in sustainability leadership, art museums – and ahead of these, those dealing with modern art – may develop sustainable management models and cultural policies that allow practitioners to work in environments where decision processes are accessible⁴². In sustainable management models, trustees or executive boards should not prevent the realization of pioneering projects proposed by the museum people. Further, information should be equally shared among curators, educators, registrars and administrative staff members. Sustainability in cultural policies highlights the fundamental role art museums have in shaping culture, producing individual and collective meanings and proposing “legitimate” vision of the world.

Modern art museums that use a sustainability framework to rethink about their managerial strategies, tasks’ division and narrative making processes, step over Foucault’s notion of *heterotopy* and, on the contrary, act as *archètopy*. *Archètopy* is a preliminary model that envisions the art museum as a *tòpos* where narratives are constructed through diegetic structures open to criticism. The word *archè* emphasizes that any time the interaction between objects and individuals takes place narratives and meanings are simultaneously conducted to the tenet of the creation process, and therefore their validity is constantly questioned. So to say, the display is constructed in a way that favors the beholder to encounter the artwork within a framework that keeps open various interpretations that may even be in contradiction. *Archètopy* art museums constantly question strategies as well as social, artistic and political issues, in order to create displays that are open to disruptions and challenge beholders with an active learning. The *archètopy* art museum wants to destabilize the linear processes of knowledge acquisition that have characterized what scholars like Jung have defined as the “mechanical-hierarchical” museum model⁴³. Narratives in *archètopy* art museums are developed within sustainability frameworks because meanings are not imposed but co-created with all the different stakeholders. The latter refuse to be passive observers of spectacles or simply learners willing to be educated. Instead, stakeholders are spurred to ask themselves what kind of experience the museum staff has designed for them and how they interact with it. Currently, art museums operate under the assumption that visitors and non-visitors are most afraid of embarrassment of appearing not to get art. However, museum’s beholders like the estrangement that art precipitates so long as they are not needlessly caught off guard and art museums should create the premises to favor the encounter between art works, people and what puzzles people about art as a sociological phenomenon.

⁴² Jung 2011.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, art museums shall develop sustainability frameworks and practices to achieve *archètopy* models that enable practitioners to make entrepreneurial, brave and challenging cultural policies and show the vulnerable side of art museums. Though exhibiting vulnerability in art museums may seem to threaten their sustainability, practitioners know that this stage of “productive confusion” is necessary to ensure the future sustainability of modern art museums’ creativity, meaning making and cultural production.

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