

Atlases of Modernity

Reshaping museum collections through constellations in the XXI century

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ABSTRACT

Dalla fine del XX secolo, i tentativi di rileggere le collezioni museali sono stati declinati in alcuni casi attraverso narrazioni non lineari che non rispettano le tradizionali categorie della storia dell'arte. L'articolo intende indagare le cause di questa tendenza globale dal punto di vista culturale, sociopolitico e teorico. Queste pratiche si sono avvicinate alle collezioni museali come ad una forma di archivio e sono state sviluppate negli ultimi trent'anni in particolare da diverse istituzioni dedicate all'arte contemporanea, rimodellando gli allestimenti e il loro ruolo istituzionale. Attraverso l'analisi di tre casi studio, il Centre Pompidou di Parigi con la mostra *Modernités plurielles* (2013-2015), il Van Abbemuseum di Eindhoven con *The Making of Modern Art* (2017-2021) e il Museo Sztuki di Łódź con *Atlas of Modernity* (2014-oggi), l'articolo analizza la necessità istituzionale dei musei contemporanei di rileggere e riscrivere la storia della "modernità" e delle loro collezioni nel XXI secolo attraverso l'uso di narrazioni dialettiche. Il rapporto tra l'istituzione, le collezioni e la loro narrazione sarà analizzato come carattere distintivo dell'identità e della missione del museo.

Keywords

Musei di Arte Contemporanea, modernità, collezione, costellazioni, rileggere la storia, pratiche curatoriali.

A new definition mirrors contemporary museums

In October 2018, during the final speech for the symposium *Le musée face à l'art de son temps* organized between the Centre Pompidou, the Musée d'Orsay and the Archives Nationales in Paris, Krzysztof Pomian was asking “à quels besoins doit répondre le musée?” (“which needs should the museum meet?”).

In the attempt to reply to this crucial question for the history (and future) of museums, on September 7th, 2019 in Kyoto (Japan) the ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly was asked to vote for a new and alternative museum definition to be included in the ICOM Statutes. The final decision was postponed due to the disagreements that came out during the debate. However, I would like to start the investigation through the analysis of this possible new definition.

“Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for *critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures*. Acknowledging and *addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present*, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and *work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.*”

Some of these words seem to enact the approach and methodology that several museums all around the world have been using in different ways since the beginning of the new century. Museums are remediating their collections in the attempt to decentralise their narratives and to approach less hierarchical and less didactic displays. As stated by Clémentine Deliss, museums need to be healed through a remediation process that needs a “third space” (Bhabha 1994). “In the first, perhaps more contemporary sense of the term, ‘to remediate’ means to bring about a shift in medium, to experiment with alternative ways of describing, interpreting and displaying the objects in the collection” (Deliss 2015). This third space could be the exhibition one (Bennett 1988). The aspiration to build the universal history and the universal museum faded away and forced these institutions to recognize the incompleteness of their collections and histories (Bann 1990).

If we try to reconstruct an incomplete history of these curatorial practices, that should be further investigated, we could identify its possible genesis in the Harald Szeemann's *documenta 5* (1972). It signed a landmark in the exhibition development (Foster 2016) and a break through the art history disciplinary boundaries (Altshuler 2013), by including the whole visual culture in the exhibitionary field and by refusing its hierarchies (Bremer 2015). From the '90s, the crossover narratives exploded and, from temporary exhibitions, landed in the museum field. They appeared through different curatorial strategies towards the museum permanent collections. Among them, remarkable examples are the artistic interventions promoted by museums such as the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen since the '90s (Meijers 1992), the transhistorical narratives and research developed by the M-Museum Leuven and the Frans Hals Museum since 2015 (Wittocx 2018), or the thematic approach initiated by the Tate Modern in 2000.

These museums opened up to non-linear paths, crossover narratives (Mejiers 1992, Schubert 2009, Spijksma 2017) that approached the museum collection as a form of archive by reshaping its display and the museum institutional role. To which extent these approaches affect the museum institution? How do these institutional changes approximate museums to the fulfilment of the discussed ICOM definition?

The paper intends to analyse the effects of these transformations on the museum institution through three diversified case-studies. They involuntarily attempted to reach the goals described in the new ICOM definition through the revision of the “modernity” notion by reshaping the role of their collections as the protagonist of temporary exhibitions. Their visions on the present intended to affect the perception of the past and the future. They will be analysed from an overall perspective that considers the whole exhibition concept and organisation as a complex body that suggests a different perceptive experience, other than that of each work of art.

Modernity came out from the French revolution and the enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, from the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism (Koselleck 2004). The world is still defined by the phenomena, processes, ideas and notions that appeared in modernity. The modern values exalted the individual subjectivity in relation to the community and its responsibility towards the present and the future.

The three exhibitions analysed asked in different ways if we are still living in such modernity and how to deal with the current times and history. The contemporary world can be understood, according to these three museum-institutions by returning to modernity from a different perspective through a dialectical approach.

Modernités plurielles (2013 – 2015) - The Centre Pompidou in Paris

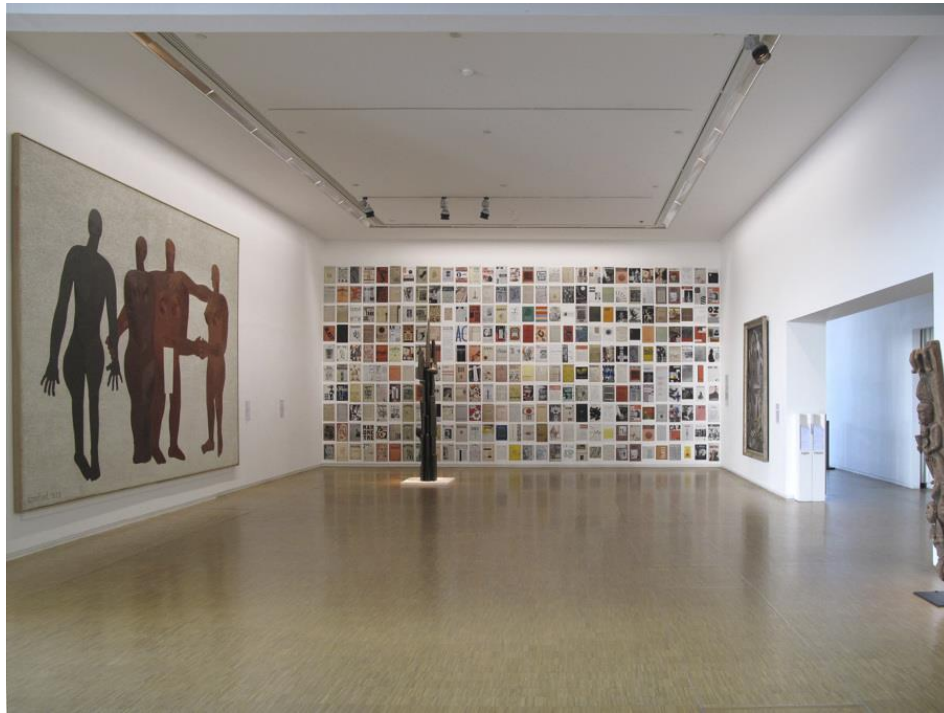
The exhibition *Modernités plurielles* was organized at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, between October 2013 and January 2015, by a broad curatorial team headed by Catherine Grenier. It was composed by over 1,000 works made by 400 artists coming from 41 countries. The artworks were chronologically ordered from 1905 to 1970.

The exhibition aimed at creating a more balanced representation of the global and diversified world through a chronological and transdisciplinary narration. It showed how key modernist ideas spread throughout the world and affected global artistic expressions. It included artists coming from the United States, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa alongside the different movements in Europe. This enlarged reading of the history of art intended to shed fresh light on a number of unjustly-neglected aesthetics and artists (Grenier 2013).

Plastic arts, photography, film, architecture and design were shown next to each other by exalting the connections and cross-influences among the different media and movements. A shared history was displayed through micro-exhibitions, where artworks were accompanied by documentation^[1] and art journals from all over the world. Artworks from the Centre Pompidou’s collection were treated as archival materials, as speaking documents re-telling the hidden histories of art.

The museum revisited principle movements through local movements and aesthetics that arose from or in reaction to the first ones. A history of connections and resistances emerged. Primitivism, international

futurism, realism, avant-garde, cross-overs, art deco, abstraction after the 1950s are just some of the themes selected for each room of the exhibition display.



Modernités plurielles 1905-1970, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2014. Exhibition view, ph. Micaela Neustadt © Centre Pompidou

However, even if this attempt to rewrite the history of global modern art through a manifesto-exhibition was remarkable, the aim of the museum was always accompanied by the exaltation of the uniqueness and expansion of the museum institution and French influence worldwide.

In fact, when reading the exhibition path in relationship with the French colonial past, some contradictions emerge in the curatorial choices and display strategies. The curatorial action is always a matter of choosing what to show and, at the same time, what to leave behind and untold. This powerful condition particularly arises in those exhibitions that intend to re-read their institutional past and global histories. The exhibition attempt to find a balance between the search for a universal art history representation and the investigation of the local culture was not always achieved. For example, in the exhibition section called *L'Afrique photographiée* the curators did not problematize the issue concerning the construction of stereotypes through the colonial gaze by silently re-affirming the same values established by the colonial history of photography since the XIX century.

Moreover, two sections highlighted some of the major Latin American movements developed under the influence of modernity. The rooms were named after the Brazilian *Anthropophagy* movement (Movimento antropofágico), inaugurated by the Manifesto written in 1928 by Oswald de Andrade, and the *Indigenist* movement (Indigenismo) that involved artists and intellectuals coming from the whole Latin American continent. However, the reading of these two movements underlined the tight relationship they had with the European and Parisian artistic expressions of that time. The curatorial texts described Paris as the model for the young Brazil nation and for the achievement of modern progress. The call for a return to

primitivism and realism was seen as a reaction against the notion of progress and brought to the birth of these movements.

For example, the curatorial texts on the work *A Cuca* (1924) by Tarsila do Amaral (1886, Capivari - 1973, São Paulo) highlighted the French influences in her artistic practice. The vegetal images recalled Douanier Rousseau, the shapes evoked cubism and art deco, while the oneiric atmosphere was seen as a clear influence of surrealism. However, they did not underline the fact that the artwork showed the strong influence of magic realism and the ancestral Brazilian fairy tales' tradition by using the language and shapes of modernity.



Tarsila do Amaral, *A Cuca*, 1924, oil on canvas, 60 x 72,5 cm © Musée de Grenoble

The exhibition was criticized for the attempt to reaffirm the supremacy of the European canon and its gravitation power (Mora 2015). The minimization of the local movements as imitations of the western model was often evident from the curatorial writings. The exhibition was accused to perpetrate the interpretation of history and the curatorial approach initiated by Jean Hubert Martin with the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 (Steeds 2013). The attempt to rewrite the history of modern art on a global level created a new occidental postcolonial canon (Barriendos 2014). In conclusion, in the exhibition *Modernités Plurielles* the European hierarchies were still pervasive and the vision on modernity was still singular.

The words of Joaquín Barriendos Rodríguez clearly explain this phenomenon. “Through this economic capitalization of the marginal sphere, the “active periphery” was set in motion. This generated an additional value in global contemporary art which reactivated the market and the circulation of legitimately “exotic” but potentially international contemporary merchandise through the capitalization of its most characteristic and stigmatized value: its marginal peripherality. (...) Anything resembling the West lost power, and everything that was different, that had alterity, was asked for maximal explanations, originalities and particularities. The more eccentric the character of the diversity was, the more likely it was

that it would be included in an exhibition of contemporary international art. (...) This history of the incorporation of the periphery into the mainstream of contemporary global cultures, despite its vertiginousness - or maybe thanks to it - is far from being the history of a true deconquest. Although it coincided with the so-called “postcolonial period,” this process of absorption of the artistic geography sinks its roots in a profound crisis of the West and in the unavoidable consequences of colonial modernity which persists under new models of deterritorializing domination through the management of cultural values and representations” (Barriendos 2011).

Atlas of Modernity. The 20th and 21st century art collection (2014 - present) - The Museum Sztuki in Łódź

The Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź is one of the oldest museums of modern art in the world. The Museum’s connections with the avant-garde date back to the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, when a group of artists from the “a.r.” group began gathering works of the most important artists of the time for the creation of a new museum. Among them, Władysław Strzemiński, a key figure of the Polish avant-garde, put forward the idea to create a collection which presented the most recent phenomena in the European art, Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Purism, Neoplasticism and Surrealism. The museum was finally opened to the public on 15th February 1931 (Sowińska-Heim 2016).

Artists such as Fernand Leger, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder donated their works to the collection in a manifestation of generosity and solidarity of the international avant-garde. The collection was then expanded by including international modern and contemporary artworks, such as part of Joseph Beuys’ Archives. This is the museum where the hierarchies of artistic modernism were nationally established in Poland.



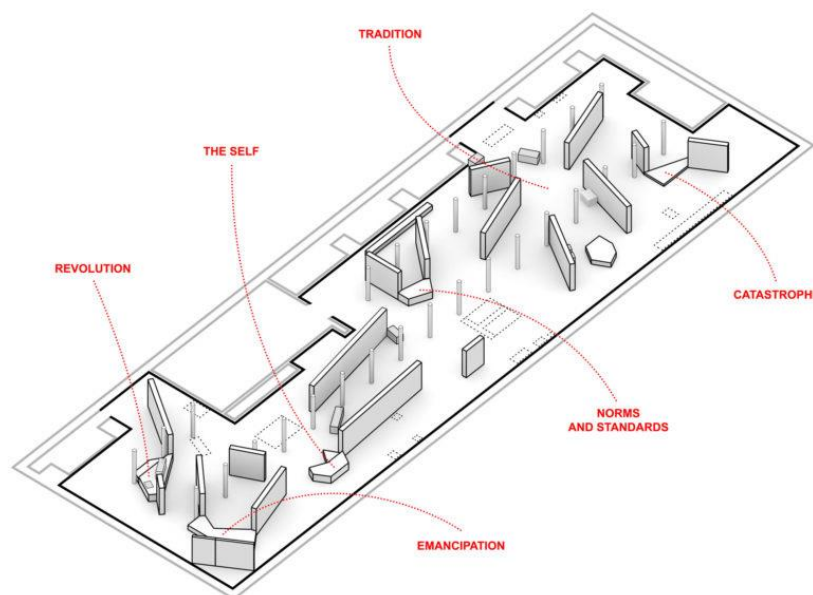
MS2, Museum Sztuki in Łódź © Museum Sztuki

From 2008 the Museum resigned from the chronological organization of the collection in favour of a thematic approach. The collection’s display is constantly renewed through temporary exhibitions. The research and the re-interpretation of the museum history are the main institutional goals and the core of its mission. The museum intends to offer to contemporary audiences the possibility to interact with the

heritage of past and present generations of artists in order to develop the ability to independently see, understand and experience the world around them.

Władysław Strzemiński believed in the educational and emancipatory role of museums, capable of not only teaching the history of art, but rather of developing society's views and perceptions. According to Jarosław Suchan, current director of Museum Sztuki, the institution helps people to cross the limits which are imposed on their thinking by the hegemony of Debordian spectacle. It aims at activating critical thinking and emancipating the viewer's gaze. "In order for this to happen, we need to create constellations in which works, no matter when they were created, are perceived as relevant to the contemporary reality and relate to life of every individual visitor. This is what we try to achieve in our museum" (Saciuk-Gąsowska 2017).

After experimenting with the collections' display, the museum started a cycle of temporary exhibitions where avant-garde art is confronted with current artistic practices and questions that are considered important for contemporary audiences. For example, the exhibition *Atlas of Modernity*, organized by a team of eight curators led by the museum director, tells a story of modernity by deepening its meaning from a contemporary perspective. It is constructed with works coming from the museum collection in the attempt to define the modernity's terms.

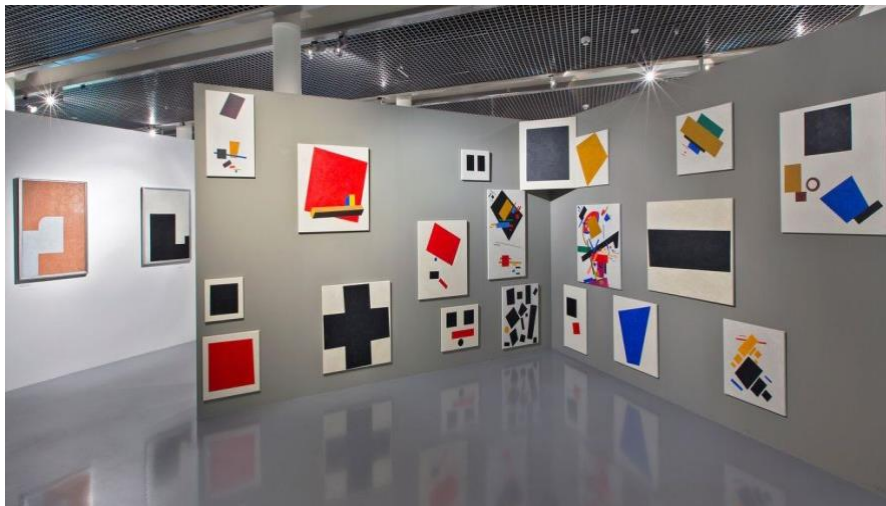


Atlas of Modernity, Exhibition design, © Budcud

In contrast with the Centre Pompidou's approach, Museum Sztuki refused the chronological order of the exhibition display. The aspiration to represent a complete and neat history of modernity and its art expressions faded away for the construction of complex and fragmentary constellations. The exhibition focused on some of the most important phenomena that are commonly connected with modernity, such as emancipation, autonomy, industrialisation, capital, urbanisation, experiment, mechanization and revolution. By creating a "collage" of artworks coming from different time periods, the exhibition

represented diverse aesthetics and artistic attitudes around these notions of modernity. The display asked how the character of these phenomena were perceived and altered and how they shaped contemporary reality. It is an atlas, an unusual collection of maps, each describing the topography of a different territory of modernity.

Among the themes challenged by the exhibition, the “museum” notion, that was constructed between the XVIII and XIX centuries, was taken into consideration. Originally the museum was perceived as an official institution proposing a unilateral view on the history and the history of art. On the contrary, the original goal of the foundation of the Museum Sztuki was to shape the citizen of the modern society. For this reason, the curators reconstructed a historical exhibition of the Museum from the thirties and installed a forgery-work of the Suprematist artist Malevich recreated by a Serbian artist, in order to challenge the cult of the artistic genius that the museum imposed across history. The practice of re-staging past exhibitions is typical of those institutions that intend to re-read and question their own history from a different perspective (Bishop 2013b). Thus, artworks, objects and prints from the Museum archives were displayed next to each other as speaking documents for the interpretation of the past and the present.



Malevich K., The Last Futurist Exhibition, 1985-2011, Atlas of Modernity, display view, ph. P. Tomczyk © Muzeum Sztuki

Moreover, in another exhibition section, the contradictory notion of “progress” was contested when opposed to that of “tradition” by showing the catastrophes that modernity caused. With this regard, the exhibition attempt to re-read art history and the Polish history is seen in works such as that of Julita Wójcik (Poland, 1971), *To sweep up after textile workers* (2004). The video projected on a screen testified the performance of the artist. It attested the past history of the museum spaces, a former factory, and the presence of the former inhabitants, the workers that were made redundant when the factory shut down for the creation of a cultural centre. Through her artistic intervention Wójcik included these workers in the art narration and history.

Another example is that of Zbigniew Libera (Poland, 1959). He plays with the stereotypes of contemporary culture, by working on press photography and the way in which the media shape the collective visual memory. The series *Positives* (2002-2003), displayed in the exhibition, explain his artistic process and his manipulation of the historic image. Some famous historical press photos were re-staged by maintaining the same composition. However, the characters and the general meaning of the captured

tragic events were transformed into their positive version. For example, the famous picture of the Vietnamese girl escaping from the village of Trang Bang after a napalm bombing in 1972 is restaged through the bodies of naked and smiling men and women, together with aviators showing a different and contradictory face of modernity.



Zbigniew Libera, *Nepal*, 2003 from the series *Positives*, 2002-2003 © Zbigniew Libera and Raster Gallery

The exhibition ends with the “revolution” theme and Beuys’ work *We are the revolution* (1972) to recall how creativity can change the world, as a capital that does not alienate, but empowers society. Over the last twenty years Poland has been undergoing a very dynamic modernization. The exhibition asked how to be conscious subjects of the modernization processes, instead of being just objects of a broader scenario.

The Making of Modern Art (2017 - 2021) - The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven

The Van Abbemuseum was opened in 1936 from the collection of a tobacco entrepreneur, Henri van Abbe. Since the arrival of the current director, Charles Esche, the museum has been proposing an experimental approach to the museum institution through the use of the archive and the collection as unique and complementary sources for the creation of temporary exhibitions that intend to *de-modernise* the museum itself. This project was supported by L’Internationale, an organization of European museums experimenting alternative readings of their histories, institutions and collections (Aikens 2016).

Through its narratives the museum takes a position and tries to abandon the patriarchal and authoritarian perspective of the traditional museum institution for an opener approach that leaves space to the visitors to take a personal critical view. The museum is considered as a political instrument, in the broadest sense, where to learn to make choices by making people see what lies outside their field of vision (Ten Thije 2017).



Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven © Van Abbemuseum

The organization is attentive to the social, cultural and political context in which the museum acts and invites to imagine possible different futures for the current Dutch society (and not only), beyond the hegemonic and predominant history of modern art. Past, present and future are constantly intertwined through anachronic actions, as Georges Didi-Huberman would call them (Didi-Huberman 2000).

Between 2017 and 2021 the curatorial team of the Van Abbemuseum, composed by Christiane Berndes, Charles Esche and Steven ten Thije, organises a series of collection's exhibitions and projects. The exhibition *The Making of Modern Art* is one of them and was developed in cooperation with the Museum of American Art in Berlin. The exhibition combines modern masterpieces from the museum collection, like Mondrian, Picasso, Sol LeWitt, Kandinsky and Leger, with an experimental story that tells the "making of" the classical canon of modern art.

In a set of specially designed atmosphere rooms, the exhibition addresses the role of museums, and shows how exceptional collectors and influential exhibitions contributed to the formation of the modern canon, which also lies at the foundation of the Van Abbemuseum collection. It explores how modern art is part of the broader modern world that includes technological and social progress, but also a dark colonial side.



Installation view The Making of Modern Art, pb. Peter Cox, © Van Abbemuseum 2017

The rooms recall the *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu (1721) where the author takes the perspective of a Persian prince, travelling through France, unfamiliar with its customs and habits. Imagining himself as an outsider, he showed his countrymen their own world as something bizarre, mysterious and amazing. The museum took the same approach for telling the story of modern art. A fictional narrative is used to tell the past history and imagine a possible future for the museum institution by showing the limits of art history and the history of its display.

Through this exhibition the museum shows how the acquisition policies of the Van Abbemuseum, after its opening in 1936, were deeply affected by the MoMA model and the international contemporary art history developed by its director Alfred Barr, as almost all the European modern art museums that were under the influence of the United States at the time. The curators showed a scale model of the MoMA first exhibition to describe the result of the North American cultural, political and economic power.

Another example from the museum experimental display is that of the sculpture coming from Sumatra in Indonesia. The object was used in “death dance” rituals. It was then desecralized and became part of an ethnographic collection and of an art museum later on. Last but not least, this kind of masks were sources of inspiration as ritualistic art for the modern avant-gardist due to their primitive forms. This object had different roles in its history and it is shown in the Van Abbemuseum as a document part of a complex story, an artefact *de-articized*.



Installation view The Making of Modern Art, ph. Peter Cox, © Van Abbemuseum 2017

Furthermore, besides its artistic and ethnographic past, the mask recalls the Dutch colonial history, strictly related with that of the Van Abbemuseum itself. The founder, Henri Van Abbe, was an industrialist who bought tobacco grown under the Dutch colonial rule in Sumatra to make cigars. “Modern art and the colonial history are intertwined and the innovation of modern art was inspired by primitive cultures that were actively kept primitive under the colonial rule”. This is the caption that the museum displayed next to the artefact together with archival materials recalling the history of the object.

The curators quoted, as special advisor for the exhibition organization, Walter Benjamin and, in a peculiar room, cited an imagined intervention taken from his *Recent Writings* from 2013. “The pictures before us represent scenes of times gone by. They were all icons in stories of religion and of art. Some depicted events from the past, while others anticipated the future. Today, they are nothing more than artefacts displayed here neither as art nor as religion”. Past, present and future are treated as one dialectical and anachronic time (Benjamin 2009).

Conclusions

The crossover and anachronic narratives are diverse and can be used as instruments for re-writing and re-reading a global and continental history and language. All these exhibitions were made out of the work of a curatorial team, not a single mind creation. They were the result of plural visions and researches. Plurality is the main element that characterizes the exhibitions that intend to re-read the history and the history of art. They are all interdisciplinary and include not only archival documents, but also other fields of knowledge, such as geography, anthropology and cinema.

Moreover, the political goal of these exhibitions often characterizes the curatorial practice behind them. The anachronic narratives oblige the institutions and the visitors to face multiple temporalities in the same “now-time” (Benjamin 2009) and evidence the crisis of a single and linear notion of historical time and space that globalization has witnessed.

These museums aim at creating new cultural horizons, new temporal rhythms, constellations that recompose a collective and non-hierarchical history, no longer conveyed from above, but co-created. This space made of relationships transforms the role of the museum that doesn't want to offer replies to the questions opened by history, but questions directly the emancipated spectator (Rancière 2009) with the gaps and material traces left by the time.

These museums built new cartographies that evolve in the institutional space. They contributed somehow to the creation of a world of relations instead of one of partitions and classifications, an "archipelago" (Glissant 2010). These institutions deconstructed with different approaches the global history of modernity through local perspectives and tried to offer new horizons of meaning regardless of the works' provenance, classification, medium, social and economic value.

The crossover, transdisciplinary and anachronic approaches towards the museum collection appear to be instruments to democratise the museum institution, to build what has been called "the constituent museum" (Byrne 2018), to activate a *critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures*, to *work with and for diverse communities to preserve, interpret and enhance understandings of the world*.

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