

## L'inconfort du conservateur face au musée « indiscipliné » : la mise en exposition dans le musée de société

The Curator's Malaise with the "Undisciplined" Museum:  
Exhibition Making in the *musée de société*

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# THE CURATOR'S MALAISE WITH THE "UNDISCIPLINED" MUSEUM: EXHIBITION MAKING IN THE MUSÉE DE SOCIÉTÉ

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Translated from French by Diana Cline

## Abstract

*The changes that have marked the museum sector in the past thirty years are profound and have been extensively described. In a field previously devoted to ethnology, the influence of New Museology and of ecomuseology has led to the development of the concept of the musée de société. This paradigm stands at odds with a discipline-based view of the scientific and cultural mission, forcing curators and other museum professionals to reassess their practices, in particular the exhibition-making process. This article will describe and analyse the consequences of abandoning the disciplinary framework and of its replacement with a multi-faceted, interpretative and interdisciplinary approach to the exhibition-making process by institutions that have adopted the trend toward the musée de société. Among the changes observed, we will examine the role of the curator within these reformulated teams. While such changes can provoke a certain malaise and even disorientation, they can also prove to be beneficial to the positioning and the future of these institutions.*

Keywords: *musée de société*; curator; project manager; cultural mediation; New Museology; museographer

It has become commonplace to remark on the profound changes that museums have undergone in the past thirty years. While they affect all types of museums, those institutions previously dedicated to ethnography or ethnology have taken a distinctive path. Under the influence of New Museology and ecomuseology, the museum of ethnology is being reconfigured around the concept of the *musée de société*. This paradigm, which today touches the most progressive institutions, stands at odds with a discipline-based view of the scientific and cultural mission, forcing curators and other museum professionals to reassess their practices. The museum's core discipline alone used to guide research planning and the distribution of tasks, along with the organization of exhibitions, especially in the case of a permanent exhibition or an "*exposition de synthèse*" (a comprehensive, but not necessarily permanent exhibition). Accordingly, this reformulation sees museums rebalancing their missions, realigning their professional or operational territories and instituting major changes in their exhibition policy.

This article describes and analyses the consequences of abandoning the disciplinary framework and its replacement with a multi-faceted, interpretative and interdisciplinary approach to the exhibition-making process by institutions that have adopted the trend toward the *musée de société*. Among the changes observed, we will examine the role of the curator within these reformulated organizational structures. While such changes can provoke a certain malaise and even disorientation, they can also prove to be beneficial to the positioning and the future of these institutions. First, let us begin with a brief overview of the *musée de société* and its underlying principles within the broader context.

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## BREAKDOWN OF THE TRADITIONAL MUSEUM MODEL

The traditional museum model – organized by discipline and around a stable taxonomy that includes a collection of objects, following an encyclopædic approach to exhibition-making, and in which the visitor occupies a marginal place – is losing ground today (Gob 2010:26-30). Under this model, the curator is the linchpin of the museum's activities, from which all other staff categories devolve. Since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this model has been widely challenged, even though traditional museums persist.

Various factors, already extensively described and commented on in the literature, explain the relative abandon of this paradigm, particularly under the influence of New Museology, as well as the changes and adjustments made to museums, their missions and their professional organization. First, the rise of the communication driven model (Chaumier 2012; Schiele 2001), focuses on visitors and the visitor experience: the exhibition must address a varied audience while playing a role in the visibility and the promotion of the institution (Chaumier and Mairesse 2013). Because the number of professions involved in exhibitions is growing (Le Jort 2014), the exhibition *auteur* is usually no longer the curator, though curators nevertheless continue to play an important role (Poulard and Tobelem 2015). Since the 1980s, museums have also adopted a “marketplace ideology” (Bayard and Benghozi 1993) evidenced by the permeation of museums – and of culture overall – with new economic and management models and the need for visibility and impact (Tobelem 2010). This impact is primarily social and is measured by attendance and the accessibility of the museum to all visitors, even those from outside the immediate area. These institutions go to great lengths to meet the cultural policy objectives of democracy and diversity, at times even to the detriment of their core missions, such as acquisition or research (Paquette 2015). Focus is also placed on visitor participation through interactive displays, various events in conjunction with the exhibition or through the social media. Finally, since the 1980s, museums have increasingly oriented policy toward the relative abandon of permanent in favour of temporary exhibitions, taking a variety of forms. Museums have turned to the spectacular (Mairesse 2002): they become (or are supposed to become) amusing and interactive, entertaining and accessible, successful and profitable, at the risk of confusing culture with entertainment. These elements, briefly outlined, concern museums in general. They take a specific form within the *musée de société*, where they bring about distinctive types of change and reorganization.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S MUSÉE DE SOCIÉTÉ

The concept of a *musée de société* arose in France in the early 1990s. The 1991 Mulhouse-Ungersheim symposium, entitled *Musées et Sociétés* (Museums and Societies), laid the groundwork. The term became increasingly widespread, in conjunction with that of “museum of civilization”, following the foundation of the Musée de la civilisation in Quebec City in 1988 (now renamed the *Musées de la civilisation*), without this second usage becoming as widely adopted. Initially seen as a new museum category or classification, the *musée de société* is today described as a discipline or distinctive approach. The concept does not encompass a uniform class of institutions having shared characteristics or forms (Drouguet 2015). However, four distinctive features of these museums “*de société*” constitute the basis of today's museological paradigm, which is an extension of New Museology.

The *musée de société* sheds new light on the museum of ethnology, of ethnography, of art or of popular culture by calling into question the discipline-based model of museums: any reference to a core discipline is seen as too narrow to serve as a single and ultimate interpretation framework for societal issues, and is abandoned in favour of the true subject of the museum – society – while at the same time playing on the ambivalence of the subject and the recipient. Are these museums *of* society or *for* society? Even though for the sake of convenience most of these institutions keep their original name, their designations (museum of history, of ethnology, of art or of popular culture) today seem outmoded. They are replaced

by the terms *musée de société* or museum of civilization, “to the dismay of those experts always quick to consider that the purpose of a museum is to illustrate the virtues of their particular discipline, meant to provide a fundamental if not exclusive explanation of the world; but to the satisfaction of its visitors, who are more interested in broadening their horizons than in being handed integral interpretation guidelines, the vanity of which they perceive.” (Colardelle 2012:98, *our translation*). We will elaborate on this rejection of the strict disciplinary model below.

The second striking feature of the *musée de société* concerns the collection, no longer the cornerstone of the scientific and cultural mission; the museum tends to distance itself from existing collections and the reasons for their existence, whether the affirmation of an identity, the description of a territory or of a more or less firm vision of culture. This basic principle seems to definitely exclude object-oriented museums, in particular the museum of fine arts, but also museums dedicated to a single discipline. In a *musée de société*, the collection is secondary, and questions of authenticity or of original context are revisited in light of new research on material culture and the “biography” of the object (Bonnot 2014). We will see that some museums nevertheless give objects a central place and have restored the collection – and the figure of the collector, private or institutional – to a prominent position in their exhibitions.

A third recurrent, if not indispensable, feature of this kind of museum is found in the collecting, study and value accorded to oral history and intangible cultural heritage,<sup>1</sup> especially through the safeguarding of life stories. It is true that museums of ethnology have always taken an interest in intangible heritage; starting with the earliest collections, first by folklorists, then by ethnographers, who sought to preserve the words and actions that accompanied the object. This interest takes a novel form in the *musée de société*, as it contributes to the museumization of traces of this living heritage by reversing the relation of tangible to intangible: the museum collects “slices of social life” that are documented by material objects that are often quite mundane and “without quality” (Davallon 2012). These are the reasons why the *musée de société* can only envisage acting in close collaboration with populations, groups and communities, not simply to disseminate knowledge or to build up narratives, but to shape a collective memory. Participation has become the credo of numerous institutions; however, many apply it hesitantly, in spite of their willingness to do so.<sup>2</sup>

A fourth essential element is a firm grounding in the present, of which participation constitutes one of its aspects. This is at once the most striking and the least tightly-focused feature of the *musée de société*, as it emerges from, and depends on, others. It concerns first collecting of the contemporary, often taking the form of an investigative collection. The museum gathers and documents objects that have no antiquarian, historic or artistic value and that can even be mass-produced, but have been chosen for their historic interest or for the social interest accorded by the institution based on testimony that is associated with them and that dictates the selection process (Pizzorni 2012). They embody “the present”, in other words, “a past that is near enough that we feel involved: we are part of it, whether we are directly or indirectly engaged by it, and for which we feel a sense of responsibility or of subjection.” (Colardelle 2012:100, *our translation*). The *musée de société* also affirms its contemporary grounding when it focuses on the past, particularly in exhibitions. The societal issues and the historical or social facts presented and developed by these institutions form part of a discourse that is situated, dated and signed (collectively by an institution or individually by a guest-curator or *commissaire*), and aimed at affirming the relative and subjective nature inherent to the exhibition.

These basic elements are shared by a large number of museums, but ignored and even refuted by others, resulting in a contrasting picture (Drouguet 2015:220–224). They intentionally disrupt habits, and are the cause of a certain malaise that we will now attempt to describe and explain.

## UNCOMFORTABLE AND OFF-BALANCE

As this broad outline indicates, the *musée de société* should not be viewed as a museum category *per se*, but rather as a new museological paradigm, as a knowledge system and framework of thought, theorized or used by a community of social science researchers, museum theorists and practitioners at a given time. By definition, this paradigm and the values it conveys are continuously changing, in a museum sector that is itself evolving – or fragmenting – depending on the observer's degree of optimism or pessimism.

Museums can no longer survive in isolation. It has become impossible, if not unthinkable, to find within a single team all the technical or scientific skills needed to meet current exhibition-making requirements. The institution can no longer rely on a core group of in-house experts; from now on it must be open to collaborations with outside scientists and to the participation of social partners (communities, visitors). Consider first the question of disciplinary decompartmentalization to see how a new interdisciplinary approach carries over to the museum's mission, and specifically, to exhibitions.

Museum categories, largely based on disciplinary compartmentalization, are currently being reformulated.<sup>3</sup> “The disciplinary framework arose from the need to restrict the field of experience by mastering the collection of information through a process that ‘temporalizes’ these information collecting and processing procedures.” (Fabiani 2012:130 *our translation*). At first glance, the concept of a discipline provides a useful, pragmatic and supposedly universal manner of organizing knowledge – and the museum field – based essentially on the scientific activity of an institution, itself largely grounded on the existence and growth of a collection. A museum or its departments can align an object, a method and a program within a discipline-based framework. Yet the ways in which knowledge is divided among complementary disciplines are unstable<sup>4</sup> and artificial. “The territory is never shared under a sort of epistemological Yalta, cutting up the world into cantons once and for all [...] The mapping of knowledge is never complete.” (Fabiani 2012:133 *our translation*).

This current reformulation is in part due to a departure from the sets of knowledge that are developed and interpreted in the university sector,<sup>5</sup> toward a greater rapprochement of the museum to today's world. The institution is now seeking to forge more links with visitors. The *musée de société* addresses the contemporary issues with which visitors are confronted in their daily lives. At the same time, research conducted in the museum is less and less discipline-oriented, having a much more post-disciplinary recomposition, since it is intended to raise questions concerning broader social needs. Institutions no longer produce their exhibitions in-house, but increasingly call on scientific collaborations, so as to multiply the viewpoints on a topic, on an issue now qualified as societal. The multiplication, starting in the 1980s, of thematic museums also contributed to the adoption of a pluri- or interdisciplinary-approach, along with that of the communication driven exhibition model. The system of disciplines, transposed to the definition of museum categories, was nonetheless well-established and thought to be stable.<sup>6</sup> The Musée des Confluences in Lyon, which opened in late 2014, is a prime example of this willingness to break down disciplinary divisions, as it opens up a fresh new dialogue between the natural and the social sciences.

The exhibition loses stability as well; it is no longer made to last: the *musée de société* fully subscribes to the prevailing practice centred on a semi-permanent core around which gravitate various temporary exhibitions and other cultural events. Giving up permanent exhibitions presupposes the progressive abandoning of major *expositions de synthèse*; the museum renounces the long-term development of a “statement” of its reference discipline, and likewise a model grounded on stability, neutrality and exhaustiveness, all three of which are illusory. “Because interpretations and modes of presentation inevitably become outdated, the temporary exhibition has emerged as the ideal means to stay abreast with current issues, without running the risk of presenting a static viewpoint or of giving the impression of eternal truths.” (Battesti 2012:16, *our translation*). This all converges to put the curator in the uncomfortable position of having to deal with more numerous and more tightly-focused temporary

exhibitions that oblige him to rely on a scientific committee, as he no longer masters all the required scientific knowledge. Furthermore, he must also demonstrate a dynamic approach and openness to external collaborations, for image and communications purposes among others. Until recently, the curator could (and at times still can) remain the primary scientific reference for the *exposition de synthèse*. Today, guest-curators, or *commissaires*, are chosen for their mastery of a topic or of an issue in particular.<sup>7</sup> While this is doubtless a good thing for the museum, it can prove to be difficult for its teams to manage.

A museum curator used to be seen as the ideal exhibition leader, as no one knew collections better than the curator. Today, the difficulty or the unease felt by curators in leading exhibitions can also be explained by the fact that it is no longer based on collections; no more than is the museum's mission as a whole. This is one of the consequences of renouncing reference disciplines, but also of the willingness to reorient collecting, research, interpretation and exhibition activities toward contemporary cultural and societal issues. In this way, the various elements of the *musée de société* overlap and strengthen each other. In a museum of ethnography or ethnology, the collection weighs heavily on the inertia of the institution and its narrative, held in the grip of an immutable identity, the evocation of a lost paradise, and even, more prosaically, the glorification of the discipline itself. The weight of the collection and of collecting inexorably focuses museums on the past and away from current issues and future perspectives. How many museums decide against producing exhibitions on contemporary issues under the pretext that they don't have a collection to illustrate it?<sup>8</sup> In any case, reinterpreting collections acquired in reference to a very specific time and space can often be so daunting that many don't even take the risk and would rather fall back on a safe bet.

For the sake of appearances and to recover a measure of stability, some museums take a different tack and accord a prominent place to their collection in their mission in general or in the production of exhibitions in particular. It can even be said that the object has made a comeback, thanks to a museographical and scenographical approach that resembles – or mimics – that of museums of fine arts, if not of curio cabinets. Despite the fact that these collected objects are seldom works of art, some museums claim legitimacy based on the very existence of a collection that they believe meets the criteria of age, authenticity, rarity and uniqueness attributable to the fine arts, and thus cannot be considered a *musée de société*. Passing off ethnological collections, documents and objects of everyday life as treasures and masterpieces is intended to raise the value of items that could seem very ordinary unless put under spotlights, placed in a display case or included in an elaborate scenography. This gives a new dimension to folk art. In any event, attributing to ethnographic objects the value of art puts them “in a constant and *a priori* immutable position, that of the world of shapes, more stable than their documentary value, which can be called into question over time, and with evolving historical interests.” (Battesti 2014:75, *our translation*).

These orientations explain how the methodology of exhibition-making and the different individuals involved in the production of exhibitions have developed side by side. We have noted that the *musée de société* also instigates participation with visitors and the communities it addresses – and that at times become the subject of research or of investigative collecting. Again, this is not a traditional museum approach, with the exception of those for which it is their avowed vocation, such as ecomuseums. Contacts and visitor evaluation are usually managed by several people, with or without the curator, including educators, evaluation specialists and technicians (if testimonies are taken). The sharing and exchange of knowledge make it necessary to reconsider the role of each.

All these factors – the acceptance of external scientific collaborations, giving a voice to stakeholders and members of the community, abandoning the disciplinary framework, rejecting the use of artificial panoramas in exhibitions, taking a relativistic approach to the value of objects – can destabilize some museums. Especially since those that are grounded in a concept “of society” are threatened with obsolescence much more quickly than others. Their continued existence is endlessly called into question.

Furthermore, these diverse elements tend to confuse the roles of each and to redefine the missions and the very identity of the museum – and of its curators.

## WHO MAKES THE EXHIBITION?

When we read the credits panel upon leaving an exhibition, the number of people involved is always impressive. Designing and producing an exhibition is clearly a question of teamwork. The number of people needed has grown over the past three decades, and the use of agencies and specialized service providers in all areas (scenography, graphic arts, basing, digital media, transportation, iconography, etc.) has become generalized, making the presence of someone who can act as an “orchestra conductor” more necessary than ever.

Curators, who used to take on all the various tasks in exhibition making, at times even sketching the display case designs themselves, are now seldom the persons in charge of operations.<sup>9</sup> Curators will select the objects and define, in some instances, the scientific content of the exhibition. However, they do not usually have the full range of new competencies needed to interpret and present this content in a way that can best engage a broad range of audiences.

It is obvious that not every curator has the skills needed to create the scenography of an exhibition, and is not necessarily able to render the essence of scientific research into a form that the visitor can grasp. With the increasingly demanding requirements of design, but also of cultural mediation and education, large teams tend to divide up their duties, and the exhibition is seen to be more than ever a question of teamwork. Are we witnessing the end of the position of curator? At the very least, their authority is increasingly being called into question. (Chaumier et Mairesse 2011:491, *our translation*).

In this context, responsibility and oversight of exhibitions are usually given to others, such as the exhibition project manager, based on the model developed by the Musées de la civilisation in Quebec City in 1988, which has become widespread, even though the term “museographer” (*muséographe*) is more often used in French-speaking Europe. The first model is that of an exhibition “manager” (*chargé de projet d'exposition*), an exhibition technician<sup>10</sup> who is only exceptionally a content specialist; an exhibition manager would instead be a generalist who handles the exhibition development process. Museographers are on the other hand more closely involved with exhibition content: they propose the presentation of the scientific material that they collect, select and organize (Le Jort 2014:164). Unless they are called upon to assume the specific role of exhibition lead organizer or *commissaire*, curators play a more low-profile role that is more concerned with the documentation and valorisation of collections. Their specific skills nevertheless remain indispensable, linked as they are to “mastery of the concept” (Le Jort 2014:37-43), but are no longer primary in a configuration and perspective that is «of society», where the accent has shifted from presenting collections toward exchanging with visitors on renewed topics from an interdisciplinary approach.

One can therefore reasonably ask: Whose voice is heard in the exhibition? Just a few years ago, the curator was quite naturally the author, inseparable from the institution and personifying its authority, or at least its scientific legitimacy. This no longer holds true, at least for the *musée de société*. A new model for the treatment of specialized knowledge has emerged. Exhibitions are multivocal in scope, with contributions from researchers (at times curators, at times drawn from other institutions, in particular universities) and educators, and are coordinated by a museographer.

Acting as the link between research and its valorisation, museographers are the persons who create the exhibition’s overall approach. They tie the project together and draw up the methodology used to organize and develop it. They juggle the demands of the sponsor with the scientific rigor of researchers and the creative work of scenographers. Their role

is to coordinate these three components without losing sight of the fourth component, the visitor, in the production of a made-to-measure project. (Chaumier and Levillain 2006:107, *our translation*).

The museographer is neither the curator nor an expert on the topic of the exhibition (unlike guest-curators, chosen for their expertise or interest in a topic); the museographer is a specialist in exhibition production and management.<sup>11</sup> The inclusion of a museographer in an exhibition project is not self-evident: many projects and institutions do not use the services of this professional, who generally works freelance, or more recently, for a scenography agency (in French-speaking Europe, at least).

Also referred to as an exhibition design agency, this type of company has become increasingly involved in exhibition making, as the visitor and the visitor experience have become primary concerns, relegating collections and at times, research, to a secondary role, which many deplore (Paquette 2015). Scenographers (or exhibition designers) are now key figures that integrate the museography team. Their intervention is an act of creativity. They create a space where visitor and content come together, they shape ambiances and delineate frames of reference, and they bring poetry, rhythm, and pace to the visitor's tour. They interpret the content of the exhibition and dramatize the space (Le Jort 2014:169). When gaps or ambiguities occur in the scientific discourse, and in the absence of a museographer, the scenography can compensate for the curator's silence. There is a risk of ending up with spectacular but hollow presentations or gratuitous aestheticization, to the detriment of the message. A spectacular or purely aesthetic visitor experience can be exactly what we want to convey – in this case, the objective is reached. Scenographers are therefore the authors of the exhibition, of the creations that they sign, in a manner of speaking. But should the purpose of the exhibition be to deliver a message or to incite the visitor to interrogations and reflections on a topic, the outcome could fall short.

The educator is becoming increasingly involved in exhibition making, at times in the research and preparation phase, especially when educators help establish contacts with the socio-cultural and associative milieu. Nevertheless, curators and guest-curators generally have a monopoly on the preliminary tasks, educators still being seldom consulted, despite their knowledge of the impact of exhibitions on visitors (Poulard 2015:12). All too often, they are only called in once the exhibition is ready to be installed<sup>12</sup> and the time has come to develop products for various categories of visitors. Mediators also play a role in reaching out to new visitors, even those who are underprivileged or from outside the immediate area, by developing adapted mediation measures and tools.

This composition, in the sense of a work having many contributors, but also that of a professional installation produced as a joint effort, taken in conjunction with the dismantling of the disciplinary framework, can create a certain malaise within the exhibition teams. These exchanges enrich the exhibition, but can also reflect accompanying complications and uncertainties.

## SHARING THE NARRATIVE

Scientific or academic partners, whether acting within a committee or not, social partners (associations, representatives of civil society and of cultural communities, and witnesses of recent events of social/historical significance) can all be cosignatories of the exhibition discourse. This multiplicity of viewpoints or what could be called the “multivocality” of the exhibition (Candito 2011:174), could surprise and unsettle the visitor, leaving an impression of confusion. It is nevertheless the museum that has the final say over the exhibition and that assumes responsibility for its overall content, making sure it remains coherent amidst the varied opinions and testimonies. The museum provides a space for expression and debate (for scientists, artists, witnesses, etc.), but has the final word. The Musée dauphinois in Grenoble has instituted the co-authorship of exhibitions since the 1980s, thereby including related contributions and scientific data. In these exhibitions, a variety of testimonies (written and oral,

objects, documents) are found alongside texts written by the museum team. After what is referred to as the negotiation phase (Duclos 2011:111-118), this team draws up the museographical approach, which is then designed by the scenographer. The exhibition is not a tool given to one group to express itself about itself. By sharing the exhibition with many voices, the *musée de société* does not become a forum for different communities; on the contrary, it makes a statement based on critical analysis – therein lies its strength.

The insertion, the inclusion of testimonies in the exhibition – and in the collection, since the testimony becomes part of the heritage – gives the witness a place. The *musée de société*, following in the wake of early community-based experiments, calls into question the principle of authority under the traditional museum model. It enlarges its scope to give a voice to stakeholders, witnesses, observers... and to build knowledge with the help of its visitors and the communities it addresses, bringing them all together into the exhibition space. This creates opportunities for dialogue (Idjéraoui 2012) and participation, however slight (Chaumier 2013). For museum visitors, identifying with witnesses and resonating with the emotion evoked by their testimony form an integral part of the experience. This fact is to be viewed in conjunction with the use of an interpretative approach to the exhibition. Yet it is not the witness or the social partner who makes the exhibition. On the contrary, the testimony is always manipulated by the designer of the exhibition, who shapes, culls, arranges and transcribes the raw material; the original version is never presented *in extenso*, but is preserved in the museum's collections. The museum gives the witness a voice, but does not endorse the testimony. It attests to the authenticity, but not the veracity of this necessarily subjective testimony, and it seems crucial to find a way for museums to incite the sensitivity and empathy of visitors, while allowing them to keep a certain critical distance from the witness's affirmations.

The cultural and political thrust of temporary exhibitions has long depended directly on the museum's scientific policy. This trend is reversing: it is now the programming of temporary exhibitions and the opportunities for collaboration and exchange with communities or visitors and for partnerships with other cultural entities that determine the topics of research (Drouguet 2015:213).

## DISCONCERTING SILENCES

Yet this same malaise can provoke silences in the scientific and museographical discourse, as if the curator or the institution refrained from speaking, intentionally or not. We have seen that the scenography can serve to fill these gaps, though not always effectively.

In this case, contributions could also come from witnesses, artists, communications directors, and others who have been given a voice. A few examples: the Musée de la Vie wallonne in Liege is Belgium's largest and oldest museum of regional ethnography. After undergoing renovations, in 2008 it inaugurated a permanent *exposition de synthèse*<sup>13</sup> presenting a broad portrait of regional life, past and present. Surprisingly, in the section entitled "Life of Spirit", and more specifically in the room devoted to religious practices in Wallonia, the exhibition team has remained mute. Not a word on religious and philosophical movements. The space is duly divided by eight panels, including a short film and a text... written and signed by a spokesperson from each of Belgium's recognized denominations. The Museum is silent, not even risking a few words of introduction to this space, leaving visitors on their own to interpret the convictions of these official representatives. It would seem that rather than sharing the discourse, the Museum delegates it entirely in an effort to achieve neutrality. There is thus a gap in the Museum's own discourse.

In other museums, the collection has regained importance, and with it, the collector. This is somewhat paradoxical in light of the principles behind the *musée de société*. Objects and the reasons motivating their collection are back in the forefront, as is the case at MAS (Museum aan de Stroom) in Antwerp, where

the Paul and Dora Janssens-Arts collection of Pre-Columbian art, a major donation to the government (or, more specifically, to the Flemish Region), is exhibited. In a filmed interview, Dora Janssens is portrayed as the principal voice for a section of the permanent exhibition entitled “Upper World and Underworld”, which immerses visitors in an impressive scenography with dimmed lighting such that they are doubly overawed by this collection of Pre-Columbian art treasures (*Le MAS dévoilé* 2011:154). Of the main theme, “Life and Death”, not much is really said. The museum’s “visible storage” repository also underscores the importance of collectors and donators. While it is certainly a welcome (and savvy) idea to praise the generosity of collectors and thereby encourage others, must it come at the expense of delivering a consistent message and inciting reflection from visitors?

Partnerships with artists and exhibition guest-curators from the contemporary arts underscore this desire to situate the exhibition in the present day, to anchor it in the contemporary and to broaden the themes of research and exhibition to include different, unorthodox, or dissonant viewpoints. This artistic intervention helps provoke and destabilize the visitor; it adds another perspective to the multiple viewpoints that the exhibition space articulates. Here, the work of art acts as another kind of testimony. However, the use of contemporary art becomes problematical when it absolves the given producer of the exhibition from addressing sensitive, controversial or simply complex issues. It delegates responsibility for the content, and the artist’s intervention replaces scientific discourse. At the MuCEM in Marseille, contemporary art is very (too?) present in the *Galerie de la Méditerranée*, its reference exhibition. According to Jean-Roch Bouiller, curator of contemporary art, these artist interventions make it possible to elevate the discourse beyond that of a purposely simplified museography aimed at the general public; they reintroduce complexity.<sup>14</sup> The question could be raised, in light of their numbers, whether these artworks don’t serve above all to compensate for shortcomings stemming from the disengagement of scientists and designers from the exhibition itself.

In any event, no exhibition says *everything*. Gaps can be intentionally left for visitors to perceive and fill for themselves, drawing on memory and sensibility within his own frameworks of interpretation. In this case, these are not the disconcerting silences of the curator or the exhibition *commissaire*, but rather invitations coming from within the exhibition itself that place as much importance on its reception as on its design. Visitors, recipients of the message, recompose the exhibition and produce a statement that makes sense to them and that escapes, at least in part, the exhibition producers. In this way, the museum incites the visitor to exercise reflexivity; and by the same token, does so as well.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD GREATER REFLEXIVITY

“Instability is to the museum’s advantage,” according to Joaquim Pais de Brito, until recently the director of Lisbon’s Museu nacional d’etnologia<sup>15</sup>. Instability is beneficial if it forces the institution to constantly challenge itself. It must be seen as a dynamic element, a reflexive process. Questioning, repositioning and doubting oneself; being self-aware. And asking visitors, the museum users, to do the same; is that not the purpose of any museum, and even more so that of the *musée de société*?

Anne Watremez (2013:32) sees “museum reflexivity” as the capacity of the institution to sustain a critical discourse as concerns its history, the history of its collections and of its reference discipline in order to continually renew itself. In a context where everything is subject to assessment and to the extent of its impact, museums all come under fire from external criticism. A museum said to be “of society” must also practice regular, ongoing self-criticism, as if it were a congenital element encoded in its DNA. This museum sector, which is not presented to the researcher (or to the visitor) as homogenous, is rife with tensions. Each museum finds its own solutions, comprised of innovation, conformism, renunciation and negotiations. As such, the choices and the positioning taken by stakeholders and institutions do not necessarily converge.

It is not surprising to see that these tensions, questions, trials and errors also concern the “organizational structure” within an equally unstable “professional ecology” (Abbott 2003; Jeanpierre and Sofio 2015:114), and call into question the place and the role of key players, especially since these can no longer be based on a collection or on disciplinary formations that dictate the structure of the exhibition. Methodologies exist for producing exhibitions, but they must take into account varied forms and outside collaborations – provisional configurations that are barely counterbalanced and regulated by a scientific and cultural mission – when there is one. Here again, the *musée de société* is “undisciplined” – the hierarchy of the traditional model is supplanted by more dynamic matrix-based approaches. This is all for the better, even if project-based management is liable to exacerbate instability among staff. The line is drawn between an idealized and high-minded vision of this instability and the precariousness felt by non-statuary members of the teams involved (Poulard and Tobelem 2015), regardless of the size of the institutions. The role of the curator in exhibition making therefore varies from one institution to another, but especially from one project to another. Often freed from the task of handling operations, the curator turns to the study, acquisition and management of collections, but loses visibility and the central role so characteristic of the museum’s traditional vision.

## NOTES

- 1 Implicit in the definition of the museum proposed by the ICOM in 2007.
- 2 The 2015 annual symposium of the Fédération des Écomusées et Musées de société was dedicated to the question of participation (Marseille, April 2015, proceedings forthcoming).
- 3 As seen in the study by Jean-Louis Postula (2015) on the “city museum” concept.
- 4 Disciplines are also subject to equally unstable schools of thought and paradigms.
- 5 With variations, however, such as anthropology, which does not take the same form in Europe and the United States, where it encompasses archeology and physical anthropology.
- 6 Its usage is still upheld in some professional associations, which advise their member museums to opt for one of these categories (ethnology, archeology, art, sciences and techniques), reinforcing the belief in, and affiliation with, one of these categories, perceived as a sort of mutual recognition. This is the case for the Musées et Sociétés en Wallonie association in Belgium.
- 7 This trend is nevertheless not generalized, as curators can still play the role of lead organizers when the topic of the exhibition (temporary or permanent) falls under their area of expertise or is their topic of choice.
- 8 As Roland Arpin explained concerning the Musée de la civilisation, “unlike what has long been the case in museum practice, the collection does not dictate the discourse, but supports and expresses it. This inversion has the effect of eliciting novel topics [...] that could seem too abstract to be ‘museumizable’, but that deeply resonate with contemporary sensibilities,” (Arpin 1998:120, *our translation*).
- 9 In smaller museums, the curator and the other staff members are versatile. They are all involved in the exhibitions, which are handled in-house, with the limited contribution of external expertise, depending on the museum’s capacity. In this context, the curator wears several hats and thus often plays the role of lead exhibition organizer or museographer.
- 10 “This profession seeks to meet the growing need of institutions for people who can manage both the ‘museographical communication’ and the exhibition itself, while coordinating the various resources to successfully carry out the project [...] The exhibition project manager plays the role of ‘orchestra conductor or team leader,’ (*Analyse de la profession. Chargée ou chargé de projet aux expositions*, 2000:VI, *our translation*).
- 11 The development of masters degrees in museology, museography, expography and heritage communications over the past twenty years has helped train specialists in exhibition production and visitor evaluation. In Québec, exhibition project managers can come from diverse fields of study, as long as they have experience in cultural management.
- 12 An alternative viewpoint on the place of mediation and cultural activities is presented by Jonathan Paquette (2015), concerning museums in the UK. Surprisingly, the author deplors the importance accorded to visitor and educational services, for which the museum is simply a vector of social change, and which take the liberty of contesting the curators’ choices.
- 13 From this perspective, the Liège museum bucks the prevailing trend, as seen in its current “Key Exhibition”, a reference exhibition covering a (too?) large number of themes. This choice is now being reassessed and the museum is progressively trying to evolve, as evidenced by the reflection published to mark its one-hundredth anniversary (*Le musée d’ethnographie, entre continuité et renouvellement*, 2014).
- 14 Paper presented at the MuCEM Rencontres scientifiques, December 5, 2013.
- 15 Paper presented at a Université de Liège Masters in Museology seminar held in Lisbon, March 2014.

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