

# MUSEUM... AND WHAT NEXT?

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The present reflection coincided with the time that had neither been predicted nor had been predictable, namely the era of pandemic infringing not only on societies' health, but also the wellbeing of museums, their social relations, cultural contexts, institutional priorities.

## On the unexpected developments in planning

The online *Cambridge Dictionary* points to two meanings of the verb *anticipate*. In the first, it means *to imagine or expect that something will happen*, with the second *focusing on taking action in preparation for something that you think will happen*.<sup>1</sup> Planning as an element proper to managing culture and also the institutions that take care of its *long lasting*, in practice contain both meanings, as well as the element of accepting certain views on some future developments without necessary proof.

*Long ago did museum stop being the temple of art visited by few connoisseurs who in solitude and silence perform lofty acts in honour of artists and masterpieces*,<sup>2</sup> wrote Krzysztof Pomian in one of his most inspiring forecasts for the functioning of museums, pointing at the same time to the fact that the future of museums consists in the increase of their number and a stronger focus on the needs of the general public. The catalyst for this statistically verifiable trend was to be found in globalization and the popularizing of organizational and artistic models that accompanied it, originally exclusively proper to European civilization, effectively supported by ICT development on a mass scale.<sup>3</sup> Another durable phenomenon in the prospect of the development of museum institutions was also the consolidation of their social and economic position, meaning the final end to its role of the recipient of *money coming from the state budget or from private donors, in both cases regarded as a donation towards higher values, replacing it with that of a donor who supplies economy with resources which can be to a substantial degree transformed into goods and become a source of profit*, if only in the form of investment into new museum buildings, yielding a return *over a relatively brief period of time in the form of revenue the town or state receive, additionally boosted thanks to the growth of service providers benefitting from a larger number of tourists attracted by a renovated museum*. When outlining this forecast, the author did not forget about the 'incantation' expressed in similar contexts that while searching for means and ways

of addressing mass public, care should be taken *not to cross the line that separates and should continue separating museum as a cultural institution from an entertainment business enterprise*.<sup>4</sup>

When summing up his view of the future, Krzysztof Pomian expressed optimism awaited by the majority of the museum circles with the words that museum *has become an institution without which it is impossible to imagine today's world, adding that the situation will remain unchanged in the future*,<sup>5</sup> not determining, however, what that museum will be, and where the limits of 'museality' will be marked out. The following were the key words of his conclusion: *If, however, nothing essentially changes in the world, the tendencies present for several decades now will prevail*.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, something has changed in the world.

## Is it appropriate to manage culture and should it be done?

The very phrase 'managing culture' contains a contradiction resulting from a more or less justified mistrust, presumption that those who want to manage culture will interfere, even if they are entitled to do so, since they are legitimized being a democratically elected authority, that is both the authority of the patron and sponsor, the master of the budget and taste.

As said by Teodor Adorno in one of his classical publications dedicated to administering culture, namely something that seemingly cannot be administered: *Culture suffers damage when it is planned and administered, when it is left to itself, however, everything cultural threatens not only to lose its possibility to effect, but its very existence as well*.<sup>7</sup> The popular argument that *the material basis for productive spirit has always been precarious and that better things will make their way by virtue of their own power is nothing but an edifying gingerbread slogan*.<sup>8</sup> Life experience suggests that letting culture and its institutions be ruled exclusively by the market and its 'free hands' eliminates all the limits of the cultural. Similarly, as according to Gresham-Copernicus' law bad money drives good money out, music that requires composing skills shall never win in popularity with amateur ways of putting sounds together. Paradoxically, in mass society culture can find right to existence only thanks to the administration it happens to oppose by its very nature.<sup>9</sup> Adorno adds that only *cultural policy which does not conceive of the concept of culture as a reified fixed configuration of*

values, but rather a policy which absorbs critical considerations in order to develop them further can provide such space for freedom, this following Walter Benjamin's thought on critics whose task it is to uphold the interest of the public against the public itself.<sup>10</sup>

The experience of the times that came after the publishing of Adorno's paper show that those who administered culture have sometimes focused more on smoothly-running operations than the responsibility of the far-reaching effects.<sup>11</sup> He observes that long before the contemporary era of the expansion of procedural management, administrative structure stopped complementing creative activity, having taken on the role of trend creator and decision-maker of 'pennies of the tax-payer' that allow for them. The conviction that *whoever receives an office from god, receives ratio from him as well*,<sup>12</sup> did not end together with the era in which Adorno wrote his remarks on administering culture.

What kind of people should thus administer culture? What today is perceived as a challenge is the domination of administering models defined by limited periods of the managerial function. Staff fluctuation, understandable from the perspective of an effective administering and personnel efficiency should not, however, collide with the understanding of long-term culture horizon, which points with particular emphasis to the need of such formation of cultural outlook of the staff administering cultural institutions, museums included.<sup>13</sup>

Literature on the subject tackling the questions of the qualifications that should be expected of those managing museums is boundless, in substantial majority written by people who never experienced the position of being such an administrator. In the paper by Stefan Komornicki and Tadeusz Dobrowolski, to whom the latter remark does not apply, we can read the textbook approach to the essence of the problem: *American views on director's qualifications bring to the fore more of the financial administering skills... Some views even express that the specialist serving as the director does not have any objective attitude to other departments, supporting mainly the department of his/her specialty. In Europe, director's task is different. Generally, the director is expected to have scholarly and aesthetical qualifications and specialize in the main domain of the museum. This attitude sounds perfectly rational, however the director with a strictly scholarly approach faced with the bureaucratic administration and dependence on the superiors, can accomplish little for his/her institution. Thus, the ideal solution would be to combine the academic approach with a certain enterprising spirit, not refusing to take on the responsibility the director has versus the authority superior to the museum.*<sup>14</sup>

The words published in 1947 remain useful also for us when in the discussion on models of educating directors, leadership categories, we are looking for the specificity of administering what seems non-manageable.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this specificity can be found in the conviction that there exist two rudiments which remind us that administering a cultural institution is an activity aimed at creating people's attitude on a society level, which firstly must assume the right to error and self-correction, and secondly, that museum by being a non-profit institution, and careful with public money, should not make money central in its world of values.

## Legislation, namely how to give each thing a proper name

Mieczysław Treter regarded museums to be scientific institutions in which *thanks to the systematic arrangement of specimens collected in a planned and skilful manner, as well as properly conserved, the whole or maybe a single branch of human knowledge of universe nature or of man, man's civilization and culture, is manifested*.<sup>16</sup> Treter, however, was far from formulating a model whose goal it would be to encompass what is hard to be encompassed, that is the museum universe.

The characteristic feature of the museum landscape in Poland is its varied character, initiated, if we limit ourselves only to the experience of the past three decades, by the 1999 reform of the local government, which meant that three quarters of the museum institutions operating at the time began then to be administratively dependent on the local government bodies, the phenomenon continued by the systematically growing number of so-called 'private' museums.<sup>17</sup> The Polish museum landscape has been altering in harmony with the forecast of Krzysztof Pomian who predicted that *small community museums will multiply, and so will collections of carriers of memories of professional, religious, territorial, political groups, or groups connected with a shared experience of war, terror, natural disaster, adding that these institutions have turned museums into familiar institutions, known, and understandable to substantial groups of the population*.<sup>18</sup>

Just like a passport does not make its owner a human being, legislation does not mark the limits of cultural activity; it is, however, recommendable for it to take into account the key and statistically verifiable challenges for the area that becomes the legislators' sphere of interest. The key challenges facing museums in Poland over the last decades have included turnout increase leading to the imbalance in the proportion of implementing non-educational museum tasks; retaining museum autonomy versus the central authorities' cultural policy; or insufficient development in the sphere of broadly understood managing the security of collections and humans.

The search for a legislative key to solve the above-mentioned challenges found inspiration in the discussion held within the International Council of Museums, ICOM, on the museum definition that finalized inconclusively during the Kyoto ICOM General Conference in September 2019. The repercussions of that event have tempted the author of these words to formulate the minimum requirements as for museum legislation whose initial reflection should be precisely the answer to the question on the museum definition:

*The museum universum, in the amplex of organizational solutions, financial and management ideas, differentiated scale of their occurrence, legal and political conditions for their implementation, as well as socio-cultural contexts, thus expects a 'minimal' definition, search for the essence of 'museum' and 'museality' in the times which for different reasons respective of different parts of the world mark the world of culture and science with the imprint of usefulness. The 'minimum' should be the collections (both in their tangible and intangible version) and the story about them created with the public in mind by the people who are aware*

of the cultural importance of their work and subjectivity of their addressees. I would leave defining of the 'maximum' of museum duties to the creators of respective museums and communities in which they live, thus keeping the faith in their creative powers and common sense.<sup>19</sup>

The continuation of the reflection on the legislative dimension was verified by the COVID-19 pandemic during which procedures were created ad hoc; in their course what proved of crucial importance was intuitive management, not necessarily taught at schools and universities, flexible thinking of the executives; apparently, it turned out that 'capacitating' of the institutions in the technical meaning was easier than the psychosocial 'capacitating' of people doing their work in a private environment, in the synergy of duties, in the fear of the unknown. Managing change became a routine (the paper was written in late May/early June 2020); far from being definitely finished, it allowed two conclusions: applying managerial methods (firstly), based exclusively on the formal authority, did not prove effective, and (secondly) who proved the most important in sustaining the operation of the institutions (and culture understood as a system of shared values) were people. After all, even in far worse historical conditions than the today's, institutions were rebuilt when teams of people ready to undertake unconventional challenges had survived.

## On museum in the future

Heading towards the conclusion, at the same time heralding the discussion that next year's 'Muzealnictwo' Annual will be dedicated to, a question has to be asked whether the epidemic has brought about a durable change, or is it merely an

episode we will put in parenthesis in future textbooks? The pandemic has proven a threat to museums in their socio-economic role stated in Krzysztof Pomian's forecasts; games with the market not always conducted with the autonomy of the public those frequenting museums and those running them. This threat thus provides the opportunity to reflect upon issues important for culture and its institutions, some of which the present paper has selectively listed.

Bearing in mind the words of Mieczysław Treter who wrote that *the museum organization is based, first of all, on a precise definition of its character, on defining museum's contents and range, on a clear awareness of the goal to be reached and means that lead to it*,<sup>20</sup> let us remember that the very persistence of things amassed in museums does not guarantee the continuity of the existence of the community which created that matter. Lifeless objects gain life not with their own power, but thanks to their conscious recipient visiting a museum exhibition, capable of understanding meanings hidden in them.<sup>21</sup> It should be remembered though, that the very making objects available to the public is not an exclusive *raison d'être* of museum institutions. The challenge is the restoring of the proportions between the function of amassing and making available, described as an alternative between *templum* or *forum*.

Around us the mechanism of natural phenomena operates; the corrective capacities of civilization are limited in its face, also as for the priorities of their application. Nature, corrector of human ideas, opens up opportunities for new ones, which also forms part of administering culture in the name of the persistence of its contents in forms that are already new.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/anticipate> [Accessed: 3 July 2020]

<sup>2</sup> K. Pomian, *Kilka myśli o przyszłości muzeum* [A Couple of Thoughts on the Future of Museums], 'Muzealnictwo' 2014, No. 55, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> <https://monoskop.org/images/f/f0/Adorno-Culture-Industry.pdf>. Chapter 4 'Culture and Administration', pp. 104-31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161, 165, 178.

<sup>13</sup> D. Folga-Januszewska, *Muzealnik. Zawód, profesja czy powołanie?* [Museologist/Museum Employee. An Occupation, Profession, or Vocation?] in: *I Kongres Muzealników Polskich* [The First Congress of Polish Museologists], M. Wysocki (ed.), Warszawa 2015, pp. 57-64; A. Murawska, *Zawód „muzealnik”. Spojrzenie okiem historyka* [The Occupation of 'Museologist'. Perspective of a Historian], 'Museum Poloniae Maioris. Rocznik Naukowy Fundacji Muzeów Wielkopolskich' 2015, Vol. II, pp. 67-77.

<sup>14</sup> *Muzealnictwo* [Museology], S. Komornicki, T. Dobrowolski (ed.), Kraków 1947, pp. 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> G.C. Avery, *Understanding Leadership. Paradigms and Cases*, SAGE Publications Ltd 2011.

<sup>16</sup> M. Treter, *Muzea współczesne. Studium muzeologiczne. Początki, rodzaje, istota i organizacja muzeów. Publiczne zbiory muzealne w Polsce i przyszły ich rozwój* [Contemporary Museums. Museological Study. Museums' Beginnings, Kinds, Essence, and Organisation. Public Museum Collections in Poland and their Future Development], Warszawa 2019, pp. 94-95.

<sup>17</sup> *Muzea w Polsce. Raporty na podstawie danych z projektu „Statystyka muzeów” (2013–2015)* [Museums in Poland. Reports Based on the Data From the 'Museum Statistics' Project (2013-15)], Warszawa 2016.

<sup>18</sup> K. Pomian, *Kilka myśli...*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> P. Majewski, fragment of the comment after: D. Folga-Januszewska, *Dzieje pojęcia muzeum i problemy współczesne – wprowadzenie do dyskusji nad nową*

*definicją museum* [History of the Museum Concept and Contemporary Challenges: Introduction into the Debate on the New ICOM Museum Definition], 'Muzealnictwo' 2020, No. 61, pp. 39-57 (paging from the Annual's online edition).

<sup>20</sup> M. Treter, *Muzea współczesne...*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> P. Majewski, *Szkic o muzealium w kulturze czasów współczesnych* [A Sketch on a Museum Object in the Culture of Contemporary Times], in: *Rzecz w kulturze* [A Thing in Culture], B. Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, D. Dąbrowska (ed.), Warszawa 2016, pp. 23-32.

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