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## MUSEUMS IN THE WORLD WITHOUT THE FUTURE

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Krzysztof Pomian, who used to repeat that museums face the future, has recently observed symptoms of the harbinger of the end of the 'museum era'. It is heralded by the pandemic and by, as he calls it, 'environmental ideology'. 1 The first questioned the economic model of development which made large museums even larger. The second, much more overwhelming, challenged the optimistic vision of the future inherent in museums' basic assumptions. The existence of museums is, after all, connected with the belief in the possibility to transfer the heritage of the past to the future. Not only do museums convince us that there will be a certain future, but that it will be in a sense similar to the present, and that in that future people will be partly interested in what we today find exciting. Therefore, if the future as such is uncertain, since climate change will transform life on Earth in the manner we are unable to currently predict, museums will lose their raison d'être that we know today. Thus, the apocalyptic vision of the disaster, the climate catastrophe, question the very idea of the museum as an institution.<sup>2</sup>

I am quoting the opinion of the world-renown expert in museum history and museology, since it can be regarded as symptomatic of today's situation of uncertainty. Both sources of threat: the pandemic and the 'environmental ideology', essentially challenged his convictions related to the museums' past. Merely several years ago Pomian published an article in Museology whose undertone was essentially different.<sup>3</sup> Not only did he not observe any threat to museums' future, but even contrary to their frequently forecast death, he could not imagine the world without museums.<sup>4</sup> He also underlined the phenomena which were to play the key role in the future. Among them he emphasized the continuous increase in the number of museums and visitors caused by the spread of the interest in the past and in one's own culture, as well as in art of other societies; this mainly in China, India, and Brazil, namely in the countries where he predicted the greatest expansion. He perceived the reasons for that in globalisation, growth of the standard of living in the developing countries, ICT revolution, expansion of international and intercontinental tourism, and in museums' promotional policy.<sup>5</sup>

In the future foreseen by Pomian museums should develop in the world dominated by the principle of capitalist growth, a peculiar 'growthism', organised, as observed by Jason Hickel, in compliance with the imperative of continuous expansion. Today's Pomian's concerns stem from the aftereffects of the pandemic and of placing the environmental disaster at the central point of the public debate, making it one of the most serious challenges on the global political agenda. They undermined the ideological bases of 'growthism' whose logics had previously constituted the foundations of the optimistic vision of museums.

These predictions lead directly to the questions related to the role of museums in the world which, stimulated by the ideology of growth, is leading directly towards the environmental disaster, or the latter has already occurred; to the questions concerning their identification of priorities in the light of the new academic consensus unambiguously perceiving the dependence between the GDP growth and the intensifying environmental disaster? Are museums able to give up the expansionist operating modus resulting from the development of mass globalized tourism? How serious are they about the appeal addressed to the governments of all countries by over 11.000 scientists worldwide from more than 150 countries demanding to renounce the pursuit of GDP growth and wealth accumulation for the sake of supporting durability of ecosystems and improvement of life quality?<sup>7</sup>

Let me concentrate in the first place on the last issue. On how the question of human's impact on the planet's ecosystem has been tackled by museums. I am particularly interested in the exhibitions which relate to the 'Anthropocene'

concept. As observed by the team of Danish female researchers and curators composed of Lotte Isager, Line Vestergaard Knudsen, and Ida Theilade who analysed 41 displays on the Anthropocene held worldwide in 2011–2019, the exhibitions dedicated to that issue, just like The Anthropocene organised in Sweden's Göteborg in 2016 by Röda Sten Konsthall, tried to answer the question what it meant to exist in the era dominated by humans.8 They also tried to define since when and where human activity has left an indelible trace on the earth, this exemplified e.g., by the Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene at INOVA (Institute of Visual Arts) in Milwaukee, USA, in 2015.9 Meanwhile, in the 2016 Mild Apocalypse Exhibition at the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, the tackled issue was the impact of climate change on the global political agenda, bearing in mind that the countries of the so-called Global North are to a lesser degree exposed to the most severe anthropogenic changes on the planet, experiencing (for the time being) merely 'mild' consequences of the Anthropocene. 10 The question how to cope with the consequences of climate change has also been seen from the perspective of resources and defensive mechanisms at mankind's disposal. The example can be seen in the A.N.T.H.R.O.P.O.C.E.N.E Exhibition mounted in Brussels in 2015.11

Presenting the Anthropocene in the light of those issues was connected with the museums' educational and disseminating role. This resulted to a high degree from the assumption that the public were not familiar with the term, and were often quite sceptical about the fact that it is man who is responsible for climate change on the earth. This was actually confirmed by the study of the public conducted in the course of *The Anthropocene at HKW* Exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2013 and the *Welcome to the Anthropocene* Exhibition at Munich's Deutsches Museum in 2014.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the Danish scholars observe three general approaches to the Anthropocene. Firstly, in every analysed exhibition the Anthropocene was associated with other concepts and phenomena which covered: man-nature relations, weather and climate change, pollution, industry, mining, fossil fuels, technology and digitizing, urbanization. justice, mobility, nourishment, evolution, etc. This is a characteristic feature of the exhibitions at natural history museums, such as We are Nature - Living in the Anthropocene (2017) at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, USA. 13 Secondly, just like scientific literature, the exhibitions manifest a different approach to the question of the era's birth certificate. Did the Anthropocene begin when the intercontinental trade began? Did it start together with the industrial revolution, or contrariwise, with the beginning of agriculture over 40.000 years ago? Such questions were asked in the above-mentioned Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene Exhibition at INOVA. 14 Thirdly, the exhibitions reflect on the museums' role in the Anthropocene and draw attention to the public, their lifestyle, and consumption practices. The Moving Plants Exhibition at Denmark's Rønnebæksholm in Næstved in 2017 showed man's position in relation to nature. 15 Meanwhile, the 2016 Future Perfect – Picturing the Anthropocene Exhibition at the University Art Museum at Albany University, USA, emphasized that man conflicted with nature speeds up climate

change, the process being fuelled by populism, authoritarianism, ethnic tribality, this, in turn, pointed to by the *In the Anthropocene* Exhibition (2017) at the Ocula in New Zealand's Wellington, and consumption culture, this emphasized by the *Anthropocene* Exhibition at Australia's Wollongong Art Gallery opened that year. <sup>16</sup> Those exhibitions indirectly accused their public of being co-responsible for the current climate situation, and addressed them as potential initiators of transformation towards sustainable development. They encouraged visitors to control their habits and reflect on their own responsibility.

However, only very few displays specified what these responsibilities and transformations should consist in and who or what should be liable for conducting them. Particularly, very scarce ones emphasized that climate change is the consequence of not only or not so much of people's conduct, but the effect of historically and politically conditioned economic systems. An exception in this trend can be seen in the Let's Talk About the Weather – Art and Ecology in a Time of Crisis Exhibition presented in 2016–2018 in Beirut, Lebanon, and at the Guangdong Museum, in China's Guanghzou, since it demonstrated that the Anthropocene was a consequence of post-colonial structures and of capitalism development, not exclusively of human activity. At the same time it posed questions about global inequalities.

The above demonstrates that although museums often do tackle the questions of climate change owing to their educational and dissemination function, they lack a more critical approach. This conclusion can be seen in the reluctance with which concepts like the 'Capitalocene', 'Plantationocene', or 'Racial Capitalocene' are introduced. In the edition of museum exhibitions the notion of the Anthropocene camouflages the fact that it is actions and decisions undertaken by a limited elite composed mainly of white inhabitants of the West that contribute to the globally felt climate crisis. Instead of specifying the perpetrators and causes of the environmental crisis, the majority of exhibitions, as observed by Isager, Knudsen i Theilade, contain the words 'humans', 'humanity', pointing to the universal source of the crisis, and dispersing responsibility by laying blame on everybody.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of the conducted analysis and conclusions that can be reached from it it should be stated that museums which undertake the questions of climate change are not courageous enough to introduce critical education revealing the historical sources of the problem. Instead, they attempt at whitewashing the inequalities conditioned ideologically. For this very reasons maybe the challenge that museums face today is to precisely (i.e., taking into account the rooting in the colonial past and the ideology of the growth capitalism) point to the reasons for climate threats. So as to sensitize the public to the necessity to undertake attempts to realistically limit them, fighting not only against the effects, but also by affecting the causes.

The concept of the Anthropocene is not obviously the only topic tackled by museums in the context of climate change. An issue apart is the already-signalled question about the responsibility, also the responsibility of museums or more broadly of the art system for incurring an ecological debt to the future generations. The problems are thus connected with museums' entanglement in global cultural tourism and their involvement in the leisure industry. Both

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have an impact on the environment. In the context of heritage institutions the two are important as for their display activity. The latter issue is relevant, since the exhibitions about the Anthropocene inevitably engage museums in a political dispute, in the controversies whether the world is truly facing a climate disaster, and whether it is humans who are responsible for climate change. Hence museums' involvement in communicating issues related to climate change and environmental protection.

However, this said, can museums and other institutions, such as historic and natural heritage sites, cultural centres. galleries, biennials, fairs, and art reviews, which are all an essential factor fuelling global tourism responsible for a huge carbon footprint, and often dependent on it, be a credible source of the attitude change and education aiming at climate preservation? Since aviation and automotive industry developed to become widely popular in the second half of the 20th century, which enhanced people's mobility to an unprecedented extent, also cultural institutions have been benefitting from this trend. In 1950-2019, the number of international trips increased almost sixtyfold: from 25 million18 to nearly 1.5 billion. 19 The destinations of many leisure trips are prestigious museums, old historic city centres, science and art centres, parks, festivals, overviews, contests, biennials, and art galleries. All these, however, are often dependent on tourism. Lack of tourism badly affects those institutions' finances. This particular symbiosis was clearly revealed during the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns introduced.

Furthermore, the number of museums and of exhibitions they mount has a major impact on the development of tourism. Over the last 70 years, in Poland alone the number of museums has increased almost 6.5-fold, the number of visits almost 7-fold, and the number of temporary displays has grown almost 28-fold. Bearing these figures in mind we must not forget that the public should somehow get to the museums. Their presence implies smaller or bigger carbon footprint which results from generating energy thanks to which voluntary, fast, and cheap trips can happen. The same applies to holding exhibitions. Exhibit transportation is the highest, though not the only environmental cost. Also costs of business trips related to the exhibitions' preparation and production, as well as their layout, catalogues, invitations, posters, brochures need to be taken into account.

The last issue was dedicated the Sustainable Museum: Art and Environment Exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Busan (MOCA Busan), Southern Korea, in 2021.<sup>21</sup> Concentrating in its assumptions on the relations between art exhibitions and their impact on the environment, the Exhibition made the climate 'challenge' faced by contemporary museums its departure point. It was planned for the Exhibition to display six works by artists from New York. The total weight of the exhibits together with the packaging essential for their transportation amounted to 1.273 kg. New York's JFK Airport and the Incheon International Airport close to Seoul are 11.000 km apart. The air transportation of that load emits 15.98 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. When added the road transportation, the total amount of the CO<sub>2</sub> emission reaches over 16 tons. Obviously, one way only. This situation is one of many in the globalized world of art in which art pieces are transported from one continent to another on a daily basis. If transported by sea, the same

load would decrease the emission 40-fold (up to 0.8 tons both ways), even though the distance of over 37.000 km would have to be covered. The point is, however, that in the first case the transportation both ways takes about 15 working days, while 60 in the other. Nonetheless, the Museum opted for the boat transport, and for some works planned to be displayed the decision was made to livestream the pieces located remotely. Furthermore, the layout was essentially minimized: the display panels were left unpainted to facilitate their reuse in the future. The texts present at the Exhibition were hand-written on scrap paper. Neither were there any posters or invitations prepared for the Exhibition. One of its central elements was a heap of waste from previous displays side by side with the art works.

The above MOCA Busan display differed from the beforementioned exhibitions on the Anthropocene in the sense that the questions of climate change and sustainable development were autothematically approached from the point of view of the procedures consisting in putting up an exhibition. Not only did the display signal the museums' 'ecological challenge', presented as a 'case study' of the transportation of works from New York, but also the catalogue published three months after the Exhibition's closure was dedicated first of all to the analysis of the impact of display procedures on the environment.<sup>22</sup> It contains essays explaining the concept of a sustainable museum, critically discussing the impact of artistic output and operations of cultural institutions on the climate. The papers also draw attention to the procedures related to a more effective use of materials and energy. Among them there are strategies applied to the transportation, arrangement of informative and promotional materials aimed at reducing the exploitation of resources and limiting waste produced by exhibitions. Interestingly, as results from the assessment of the Korean National Maritime Museum, in the course of 3-4 months of the duration of an exhibitions, on the surface of 400-500 sq m about 4-5 tons of waste are produced.<sup>23</sup>

As a response to the negative impact of museums on climate the MOCA Busan Exhibition proposed, first of all, the reduction of the carbon footprint displays can generate. Although in the 'Eight Practical Strategies' serving the implementation of the 'Manifesto of a Sustainable Museum' constituting its programme creed the challenge raised was the creation of the increasing number of exhibitions and the intercontinental circulation of art works, the main focus were the issues of energy and material consumption. Globalisation and the logics of the capitalist growth, yielding as results excessive production and inequalities, were not questioned, but merely signalled as phenomena which can bring negative consequences to the environment. Finally, the story of the transportation of the works from New York expressed mitigation actions meant to mitigate the effects of the exchange within the global cooperation network. It consisted in replacing the transportation means with a less emissive one. Since after all the sense of the works' display on site as such was not questioned. A similar criticism could be formulated with reference to the very idea of staging a conventional international exhibition. Interestingly, the 'Eight Practical Strategies' justify holding large globalized displays with the range and prestige of such a display format. Meanwhile, in practical terms this implies boost in tourism and business causing yet more  $\mathrm{CO}_2$  emission. Nonetheless, the climate consequences of the reception of exhibitions addressed to the global public were not taken into account. Instead, the focus was on the issues connected with the exhibitions' preparation and mounting. <sup>24</sup>

Therefore, a question can be asked whether it is the actual strategy change that backs the exhibitions tackling the question of climate change, or a cynical game of appearances? Is it really all about the care and awareness of the threat resulting from over-exploitation and waste of the planet's natural resources and the attempt at limiting them, or is it merely about harmonizing with the fashionable trend (greenwashing, artwashing), with the market strategy aimed at reaching some communication with the public regardless of their age?<sup>25</sup> Are museums and other institutions called to protect the heritage authentically convinced that their role and tasks are not only reduced to the care for the past, but also for the future to the extent much broader than that delineated by the horizon of their traditional responsibility towards the future generations consisting in preserving traces of material culture and nature either created or discovered by earlier generations? Finally, should the loss of trust in expansionism lead to the concern about the museums' future as observed by Pomian?

Although these aporias echo the argumentation characteristic of climate denialists, I am far from revealing low instincts with which museums and other heritage institutions engage in the questions of ecology, sustainable development, and preventing climate change, although benefitting from the systems which ruthlessly and short-sightedly exploit the natural resources. Contrariwise, the pro-environmental and pro-climate attitude can forecast a more thorough change in the paradigm of a museum whose twilight is heralded by Pomian, which, however, does not necessarily mean the museums' final end. 'Consistent ecologism' does not necessarily mean 'radical anti-humanism'; neither does it consist in combatting museums up to their eradication, as heralded by the museologist.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the *Coalition* of Museums for Climate Justice, 27 Museums and Climate Change Network, 28 Gallery Climate Coalition, 29 Museums for Climate, 30 Museum for Future, 31 museums and science centres committed to implementing the 'Tokyo Protocol' adopted at the Science Centre World Summit in Tokyo in 2017 to support the sustainable development principles worked out by the United Nations,32 do not necessarily have to be a symptom of a cynical game or an expression of a strategy coinciding with a short-lasting trend. In many a case they express the actual evolution of attitudes and priorities which make museums address global challenges of contemporary societies and states. It seems, however, that they should put more emphasis on education and work with local communities in order to solve these problems rather than participate in the race whose stake is attracting the interest of an increasingly more numerous and preferably international public often actually perfectly aware of the state of the natural environment.

Since it is not subsequent exhibitions, but more educational programmes which express the effectiveness of the use of the potential created by exhibitions, providing a broader engagement framework for a more varied public. Such programmes open space for dialogue on climate change and its causes, allowing to present reliable scientific research results, to publicize and publicly discuss alternative

creative opportunities for the use of new power resources whose search is a symptom of an open approach to innovation, necessity for change, and diversification. The space which has a potential to extend the range of conventional narratives on climate, consisting in promoting behaviour change by inciting fear, guilt, and by heralding the inevitable disaster. Leaving aside frightening and ex cathedra teaching, by underlining the potential of the forum and of alternative education methods, museums can create the chance for talk on climate processes. The research conducted in the United States shows that on average 71 percent of Americans are aware of climate change taking place, yet only 36 percent admit that they have had a chance to talk about it. The majority of people are aware of the phenomenon, yet they do not converse about it.33 Meanwhile, museums provide an arena for dialogue where people can meet and become familiar with an alternative exceeding their everyday life and experience, as well as with perspectives of other individuals, communities, places, trades, and sectors. Museums are key places of formal and informal education covering a wide thematic range: from science, through technology, medicine, up to ecology, and traditions of various ethnic groups. Owing to the fact that they enjoy high public trust, actually higher in many cases (countries) than the government, business, advertising, or the mass media, museums can be used as tools consolidating critical interpretation of the flood of information on climate change presented by the mass media and social media full of fake news. Museums are and can remain places of the presentation of diagnoses and argumentation based on facts, research, and verified proofs.

These recommendations seem of particular significance in the Polish context. One of the most important conclusions from the 2019 survey dedicated to how much people know about climate change is as follows: Poles feel they know too little, and they are open to discussion. They accept educating better than frightening. 34 Polish museums, but also libraries and other cultural institutions, on various levels, are faced with the opportunity, if not a must, to create for afor effective communication and education based on knowledge and eliminating fear resulting from lack of understanding. In this context, and particularly in smaller towns, an enormous opportunity is provided by the SOWA Initiative (reading: Zone of Discovering Imagination and Activity), launched in 2021 by the Minister of Education and Science, and implemented by the Copernicus Science Centre in Warsaw. Its goal is to create a network of 32 minicentres of science based on the resources and educational experience of local-government cultural institutions, including museums and libraries. The first 'little Copernicuses' were established e.g., at the Adam Próchnik Municipal Public Library in Piotrków Trybunalski, the Jan Pazdura 'Ecomuseum' of Nature and Technology in Starachowice, or at the Regional Museum in Jarocin. 35 The discussed initiative opens up opportunities for interdisciplinary display and educational projects combining humanities in the broad meaning of the term with science. Therefore, it provides platform for problem-focused projects approaching the presented and discussed issues from various perspectives: of different science disciplines or research methodologies, yet also from essentially different epistemologies, i.e., from the point of view of science and art. As a result, complex questions, such as e.g., climate change, their causes

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and consequences, can be presented in libraries, museums, or art centres through the combination of areas which differ as much as history and visual arts with meteorology, physics, or geology. They can become homes to those disciplines mixing in an academic atmosphere, which does not happen frequently. Therefore, particularly in smaller towns which as a rule lack academic centres, it seems that the optimal venues for mounting exhibitions and implementing educational programmes allowing to present argumentation and debate on climate threats are the cultural institutions hosting SOWA.

With respect to climate change museums' task is thus to contribute to the slow work on establishing the common world which we: humans and non-human creatures share on equal terms. This is the sense we need to adopt to tackle the above-raised doubts. Although museums and heritage institutions use the benefits of developed economy which harm the climate, at the same time they carry the potential that can be used to imagine a new order and an alternative vision of development not based on growth and inequalities. They can truly constitute the source of change of attitudes stemming from pro-environmental education.

Abstract: The paper is dedicated to museum's commitment to struggling for climate and against climate change. Facing the key imperative conditioning museums' operation whose sense is defined e.g., by the assumption that there will be 'some' future for whose sake it is worth while taking care of museum exhibits and other testimonies to the past and contemporary culture, the climate change we are witnessing makes museums face very special challenges. As institutions of social trust they continue to be regarded a credible source of knowledge, they engage increasingly more in activities aimed at preserving the environment. This can be clearly seen, for example in the exhibitions dedicated to the Anthropocene mounted in museums worldwide over the last decade. The engagement of

museums in this respect and this engagement's object are the topic of the paper. Furthermore, a critical view is presented not only of the people and the institutions they create, or more broadly cultures and civilisations, all of key importance for our planet's future, but also of the fact that certain topics, as praxis has shown, have remained untouched by museums (e.g., responsibility of global corporations or the ideology of capitalist growth). In this very context questions are also asked to what degree and how much museums can change their practices affecting the climate, if only by renouncing or at least limiting their participation in global tourism and competition for public's leisure time in the market game for attracting consumers' attention.

Keywords: sustainable museum, education, museums' future, the Anthropocene, climate responsibility, climate change.

## **Endnotes**

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- <sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.
- 11 Ibidem.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96.
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- <sup>21</sup> See Sustainable Museum: Art and Environment, https://www.busan.go.kr/moca\_en/exhibition01/1488230 [Accessed: 23 March 2022].
- <sup>22</sup> Sustainable Museum. Art and Environment, ed. by Kim Seong-Youn, Busan 2022.

- <sup>23</sup> Kim Yoon-ah, 'Sustainable Museum. Various Ways of Exhibitions', in: Sustainable Museum..., p. 60.
- <sup>24</sup> 'Eight Practical Strategies', in: Sustainable Museum..., pp. 44-45.
- 25 Contrary to the popular conviction that it is mainly the young generation who seem the most aware of the catastrophic state of the environment and of its consequences which they will be realistically affected with in their adult life, also the 60+ group are concerned about the climate. See J. Chełmiński, 84 proc. Polaków przejmuje się zmianami klimatu. Oczekują działań od rządu i biznesu, https://wyborcza.pl/7,177851,27704847,84-proc-polakow-przejmuje-sie-zmianami-klimatu-oczekuja-działan.html [Accessed: 25 October 2021].
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- <sup>34</sup> Ziemianie atakują, Warszawa 2019, p. 64.
- <sup>35</sup> More on the SOWA Initiative see https://www.kopernik.org.pl/projekty-dofinansowane/sowa [Accessed: 9 August 2022].
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