

Reflections on the encyclopedic museum

I think there is much to Elaine Heumann-Gurian's claim that "museums of real inclusion may be possible only if the competing traditional object-focused aspirations are reduced or even discarded (2006, 116)." Some would interpret this as saying that in order to be thoroughly public spaces museums must stop being museums. But I think this is not the only interpretation, it can instead mean that stately and city museums holding and exhibiting large encyclopedic collections do not function very well as public spaces of appearance (Arendt 1958, Butler 2011). Their role might be to be what Barrett (2011) calls public intellectuals—resources to broaden the range of arguments in the public sphere, to give equal and fair room to different paths, traditions and world views.

Different kinds of museums of course hold very different collections and it is impossible to give *one* answer to the relation between museum space and collections. The first distinction I would like to make is between collections with encyclopedic ambitions, such as for example most natural history museums, national museums, art museums and ethnographic museums, and collections of more localized heritage such as memorial sites and community museums (Cuno 2011). Public museums holding large encyclopedic collections can be inspired to be bold, but might not be able to copy the situated stance of fantastic places like the Jane Addams Hull House Museum (Junkin 2011).

In the encyclopedic collections of ethnographic museums we find objects collected from what has been categorized as tradition cultures. They were never part of normal times; never coeval (Fabian 1983). Can they find a space as something other than a point of reference showing ways of living that 'we' have left behind?

The former director of the Art Institute of Chicago, James Cuno has written a whole book in praise of the encyclopedic museum. He sees the encyclopedic museum as an argument against any chauvinistic cultural identity. Instead such museums rest on a cosmopolitan identity and show that that culture "has never known political boundaries but has always been dynamic and hybrid, formed thorough contact and exchange with diverse peoples. (2011: 3)" He also stresses that the encyclopedic display respects the individual agency of the visitors as it mainly makes the objects it has collected available to the gaze of the visitor, with some contextualizing information, who can think whatever they like about the artifact and its place

in culture and history. Cuno ascribes to a very classical definition of the museum as an institution that gather, classify, catalog and present facts about the world. “Encyclopedic museums hold to the principle of universal access to knowledge”. (2011: 30) He thinks very little about the inherent problems of classification and defining what is a fact. Still, he makes a strong argument for the museum as an encyclopedia, full of experience and objects, but opens to the agency of the visitors who always choose and combine the encyclopedic entries according to their own agency and agenda.

When visiting the Art Institute, one can be impressed by the number of visitors and the vastness of the exhibited collection. Still, to me the classification of the exhibition is less straight forward than Cuno argues. The broad organizational principle is different civilizations. Western art, Buddhist art, Hindu art, Islamic art and so forth. Within each civilizational display there is a chronological order. The biggest exhibition is of Western art where one walks from ism to ism through history. It is informative and many painters and specific works familiar from History of Art-books are exhibited. There is a specific section on American Art from the 18th century to 1950. Here one can learn about the relations between European and (North) American art. Then, in a separate section of the museum building there are galleries with “Indian art of the Americas” where ”Native North American Indian works, particularly from the Plains Indians, the Southwest, and California, are on view.” In this gallery the labels refer to tribes and ethnicity rather than chronology and relation to other aesthetic developments in the North American continent. The implicit message is that Native Americans are not part of American art and society. Even if I as a visitor am free to meet the artifacts and author my own experience the classification is by no means objective or unimportant.

I would thus argue that Cuno’s argument is more convincing than his former institution, which also goes for its other grand example, the British Museum. The overall mission that “by providing a diverse population of visitors informed access to representative examples of the world’s many cultures, it can serve to dissipate ignorance about the world and promote understanding of difference itself (Cuno 2011: 111)” is highly acceptable. The words in this mission that needs to be highlighted and discussed are of course “informed”, “representative examples” and “the world’s many cultures”. None of them are straight forward or as unproblematic as Cuno wants to convince his reader.

A similar way of trying to behave ethically towards our collected objects has been to try to ascribe human value and normality to the producers and users of these objects. But they are also resources for uncovering other ways of expressing humanity. If ethnographic museums stop “grounding our critique on the universality of ‘human nature’”, and instead try to embrace “the perspective on ‘human nature’ of those whose humanity has been called into question” we might get a more reciprocal relation with the collections departing from the traditional, encyclopedic efforts (Mignolo 2011, xviii). Museums should not be seen as experts, but apprentices helping to learn from, rather than learn about the traditions whose expressions they curate (Nicks 2003). The editor of the encyclopedia must be very humble as to his possible ability to write, or even understand, all the entries in it.

The encyclopedic collections can be repositories to other paths, traditions and world views, locally and globally. Being thoroughly encyclopedic would mean displaying this in a strict uniform order, as the alphabetic order of encyclopedias. In a museum the workable overall structure would most probably have to be something else than the alphabet. One of the main aspects of the encyclopedia is thus lost. Is there any other mode of ordering that is as straight forward and random? A strict chronology would of course be possible, even if this carries much more meaning and interpretation than the randomness of the alphabetical order. Maybe size and/or material could work? What about an alphabetic order that would put a pillow from 19th century Morocco next to a pincer from 11th century Bolivia?

A successful encyclopedic museum seems to come not only from the scope of its collection, but also from its ability to find a means to give access to the collected objects in a thoroughly encyclopedic manner. The order should be as discrete and random as possible in order to open for the agency of the visitor.

References

- Arendt, Hannah, (1958), *The Human Condition: A study of the central dilemmas facing modern man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Barrett, Jennifer (2011), *Museums and the Public Sphere*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Butler, Judith, (2011a) ”Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”, *Transversal*, no.10 <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>
- Cuno, James (2011), *Museum Matters: In praise of the Encyclopedic Museum*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fabian, Johannes, (1983) *Time and the Other: how Anthropology makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Heumann-Gurian, Elaine (2006) *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian*, London and New York: Routledge.

Junkin, Lisa (2011) "Sex in the Museum: Building Relationships and Pushing Boundaries at the Jane Addams' Hull-House Museum" in Gregory Chamberlain ed. *The Radical Museum: Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, No place: Museum Identity Ltd.

Mignolo, Walter, (2011) *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Nicks, Trudy (2003) "Museums and Contact Work: Introduction" in Laura Peers & Alison K. Brown (eds.) *Museums and Source Communities: A Reader*. London: Routledge.