

Handle with Care:

The Influence of New Institutionalism on Collection Displays in Italian Contemporary Art Museums

Micaela Deiana

Introduction

This article examines the curatorial debate in Italy over the last decade, concentrating specifically on the curatorial experiences implemented in permanent collections within museums of contemporary art that have registered a higher degree of heterodoxy, both on a theoretical and display level. This research is formulated according to two concentric objectives. The first is to observe different national trajectories—until now considered unrelated—as part of a single European collective curatorial experience: New Institutionalism. It will become apparent that the projects under analysis respond to the same mode of conceiving curatorial practice in relation to permanent collections in such a way that, within aesthetic language, a path towards political thinking can be found. The second objective is to highlight how the realignment of the national with respect to the international debate is an essential step to take in order to overcome the position of weakness in which the Italian system currently finds itself. To trace this narrative, the pivotal models of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and Reina Sofia in Madrid will be analyzed first, with the national case studies being delved into later.

On the trail of experimentations in the 1980s around the format of ahistorical exhibitions¹ on the part of curators and

the parallel involvement of artists in the design of museum layouts,² we are witnessing, at the start of the new millennium, the rise of new exhibitiv approaches towards permanent collections. The interpretation of an artwork within historical sequences proposed by the curator has been rejected in favor of an individual experience of the artwork, a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery in looking at a work, rather than find themselves staying on the conveyor belt of history.³

The research for this kind of experience encourages many museums to structure the display of their collections in monographic rooms (if permitted by the size of the collection itself), in biographic exhibitions, or dividing it by subject—the so-called “climate areas”—where artworks from artists of different times and movements create a dialogue on allegedly universal themes, or themes that at least bring a common thread to the narrative.

The most exemplary case of this trend is the display strategy proposed by Tate Modern, from 1998 until the reinterpretation of its collections last spring—concomitant to the opening of the new wing. The strategy envisioned a meticulous display of the permanent collection through macro-themes⁴ in order to balance a conceptual reflection with an installation that was as “effective” and “beautiful” as possible.⁵

Experts still debate if audiences favor these solutions in place of a canonical, chronological itinerary. Frances Morris highlights how these suggestions only work when the visitor is familiar with the exhibited research. She argues that a dialogue between Claude Monet, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock is more easily appreciated than one between Claude Monet and Richard Long; the pictorial relationship between gestural abstractionisms is more comprehensible for a non-expert viewer than an environmental one between an impressionist landscape and Long’s installation.⁶

On the contrary, independent curator Stella Rolling suggests that, for the same principle of familiarity, the traditional, chronological exhibition is more easily appreciated by the visitor, as time is an interpretative category internalized in every human experience.⁷ This reading is opposed by curator Mari Carmen Ramírez, who affirms that the distribution of knowledge of these strategies would be inadequate, incompatible—and therefore incomprehensible—with contemporary lifestyle, which is instead oriented towards “simultaneity” and “juxtaposition.”⁸ The questions about the effectiveness of this curatorial strategy intensify when it is observed through a more “political” curatorial gaze, such as that proposed by New Institutionalism.⁹

public institutions in a predominantly Northern European context, and strictly identified with the curators that embraced its experimentation. Consistently recurring names are Charles Esche (Rooseum, Malmö, and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), Maria Lind (among others, Kunstverein München), and Manuel Borja-Villel (MACBA, Barcelona, and Reina Sofia, Madrid). New Institutionalism's historical phase ended in the mid-2000s, but its influence is still ongoing in several contemporary curatorial projects. It refers to a series of curatorial practices focused on the ontological and social role of contemporary art institutions, reshaped after modernist and postmodernist perspectives, and how they investigate a different system of the production-display-consumption of culture.

For a museum, reflecting on a production system different from the one imposed by neoliberal logics means taking a stance, both in narrative and political terms, and thus assuming a civic role of social responsibility.¹⁰

In today's socioeconomic system, the museum is effectively under pressure both from marketing practices—big-name expositions, temporary exhibition hype—and political networking (e.g., the celebration of acquisitions and donations). There is a risk involved in chasing this trend, namely, that of diverting energies dedicated to the care, research, and valorization of permanent collections from the core of the program, as the ICOM Ethics Code certifies.¹¹

Particularly under the pressure of cultural policies, the exhibition event with marketing interests drifted apart from collection activities and research. Meanwhile, the public who already had seen the highlights of collections lost their interest in them, especially when they had been shown for decades in hardly modified, fusty permanent exhibitions, or in small temporary presentations addressing experts [...]. Even if the collection is creatively varied, the core audience still prefers event exhibitions, since it has been trained to look for well-known names. By trusting in familiar names, visitors perhaps hope not be disappointed.¹²

How can we answer the need for pleasantness and entertainment from a spectacularized world, without giving up reflection? How can we investigate the identity of the museum through the display of its permanent collection? How can we creatively work on the collections without dilating the times for collection research, but instead taking advantage of the flexibility of the temporary exhibition format and, at the same time, fostering the *kunsthallification* process already in place?¹³ Charles Esche's vision of the museum as "cultural memory machine" exemplifies the approach by which the practice of New Institutionalism attempts answer these questions.

I think museums are a sort of cultural memory machine. We retain the cultural memory of a particular society and a particular element within that society. And I think that providing access to this cultural memory and actualizing it in the here and now is what is important. To collect an object is significant because inside the object is this cultural memory of a

community, of a particular moment or set of conditions. You can get access to this cultural memory through the object, which opens up a whole perspective on the world.¹⁴

The duty of a museum is therefore to develop processes of inclusion that seek new ways to relate to its audience, not to shape it, but rather to stimulate the emergence of new subjectivities.

This approach recalls Jacques Rancière's theory of the aesthetic regime.¹⁵ Reformulating the notion of aesthetics, he focuses on *aisthesis*, or a sensory perception of the artwork. Leaving aside the dispute between autonomy and heteronomy of the artistic statute, it focuses, following Kant, on the autonomy of our experience of art, where aesthetic judgment suspends the domain of the faculties of reason and comprehension, creating a reflective condition of interrogation about the world, about how it is constituted, and therefore also about the possibility of change. Under this condition, Rancière unites art and politics in terms of a common partition of the perceptible; as in the multiplicity of the aesthetic experience lived by an autonomous subject, we find the same possibilities of choice—and dissent—of politics.

In multiplicity and dialectic, art would then contain in itself the weapons for emancipation. An emancipation that is individual, first of all, within the personal perception and enjoyment of art-making, able to create an interrogative moment that does not censor the contradictory thought. To construct this aesthetic condition, the collection—what Manuel Borja-Villel called the “archive of the commons”—represents the center of the mediation. This mediation can be realized through a radical pedagogical process, where learning does not require an educator, but takes place through the form of the experience, in this case, of art.¹⁶

The experiments on the collection display operated by Borja-Villel and Esche, respectively directors at the Reina Sofia and the Van Abbemuseum, constitute successful examples of this belief. The Reina Sofia offers its own collection with long-term installations based mainly on chronological criteria, weighing Western artistic production and not, and balancing “high” and “low” culture, but at the same time refraining from deploying experimental exhibition formats.¹⁷ The most interesting contributions in this sense actually regard the way curatorship is completely dedicated to defetishization strategies of artworks, even where the exhibited work represents one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century art history.

How can we maintain the political effectiveness of a painting such as Guernica, which was a symbol of resistance during the Spanish Civil War and an icon of the democratic transition in our country, but which today also functions like a piece of trivial merchandise, exchangeable in the form of refrigerator magnets, T-shirts, and other trinkets?¹⁸

In the delicate case of *Guernica*, it is because the work is exhibited in a display that does not celebrate the artistic genius of Picasso, but rather gives an overview of the cultural production of those years, without hierarchical criteria to separate high and low culture. The display includes a maquette of the 1937 Spanish Pavilion, documentaries, propaganda posters, magazines, and drawings of soldiers on the front line to recreate the atmosphere of the civil war years. The aesthetic experience remains, albeit muted in its auratic character and applied to different media; at the same time, the museum offers the possibility to integrate it with historiographical insights and material cultural artifacts.

An additional source for reflection is offered by the Van Abbemuseum around modes of the personalization of the visiting experience, particularly with the projects *Plug In to Play* (2006–2009) and *Play Van Abbe* (2009–2011), ideated by Esche:

It's our ambition in the museum to create the conditions in which you as a visitor and participant are helped to think critically about the world as well as what we have done. At the same time, we hope you can enjoy the experience of looking at works of art in our collection and feel empowered to construct your own narratives around them. We would ask you to keep both levels—the artwork and the context—in mind.¹⁹

This line of research was developed after having found that, despite working on the quality of the permanent collection, attention—press, visitors, and even the operators themselves, in the end (in terms of financial and curatorial energies)—is primarily drawn to temporary projects. It started with the transformation of the permanent collection into a constellation of temporary exhibitions, *Plug In to Play*, comprising a total of fifty-one editions over the course of three years, with variable durations and sometimes overlapping one another, in the spaces of the new building where the collection had never been shown before.

With the purpose of creating new perspectives, able to strike out the historical vision proposed until now, a curatorial discourse was presented that involved, besides the curators within the institution, independent professionals, art historians, researchers, artists, and people who were not professionally involved in contemporary art. Each proposed his or her own “plug-in” in response to personal experiences and providing thematic, visual, and archival hints.²⁰ The authorial exercise performed by these nonprofessionals offered the most interesting results, as in the case of #49: *Exhibition: Interior*. The exhibition was born from the self-nomination of Wim van Nuenen as curator. A longtime volunteer at the museum, he proposed entering into dialogue with his eleven-year-old niece, Caya. He offered a small reflection on the theme of the domestic interior intended as both physical and mental space, presenting a lyrical vision of the collection that went beyond any expositive logic but expressed the personal vision of the two creators.

After the collection was fully examined through its many narrative possibilities, therefore acquiring a greater awareness and understanding of its discursive stratifications, a moment of self-reflection on institutional identity followed: the acquisition policies that led to the formation of a collection were now under examination: the way the directors' decisions had articulated the institutional vision for decades, the narratives that originated, and how the public had welcomed, and still welcomes, this intricate network of dynamics. *Play Van Abbe* developed over the course of eighteen months, articulated in four chapters: "The Game and the Players," "Time Machines," "The Politics of Collecting / The Collecting of Politics," and "The Tourist, the Pilgrim, the Flaneur (and the worker)."

Precisely this final step represents one of the most interesting and successful experiences in curatorial experimentation around the personalization of a museum visit. The true protagonist of this project is the apparatus supporting the visiting experience, such that the exhibition itself assumes an almost secondary function. The objective is to outline a reflection on the behavior and mind-set the visitor adopts while experiencing the exhibition. The pilgrim, the tourist, and the idler (the art worker, in this case, is placed in a subordinate role) become expressions of the possible modes of fruition. The three categories are combined under an idea of the "journey"—the museum experience—lived, respectively, as a moment that feeds itself with contemplation, a distancing from the strenuous everyday life in order to explore that which is unknown, and finally, a curious loitering unassociated with specific needs.

For each role a different path through the exhibition was suggested, where the layout appeared especially articulated to suggest the variability of the landscape along the way: the multidirectional plan did not confine the visitor to a predefined path, and came alive through the alternation of wide, airy rooms and intimate alcoves, where single works could be contemplated. When entering the exhibition, the visitor was asked to choose which role to play, and on the basis of this choice was handed a supplement to the visit, thereby becoming the "player."

These seemingly rigid roles might appear to deny the freedom of the single visitor. In fact, this freedom is enacted by way of convention: through role-play, the visitor is given the chance to become conscious of the modes he or she is accustomed to when observing art, thus highlighting the existence of a vast spectrum of possible experiences, of which the four proposed roles only represent a limited fraction. Furthermore, nothing prevents the visitor from seeing the exhibition again, this time choosing a different "filter" and tickling new curiosities. The process activated here seeks an auto-determination of the individual, always open and modifiable through the exhibition as a moment of

radical education. Alison Burstein, from MoMA's education department, after visiting as "The Pilgrim," remarked:

Leaving the Van Abbemuseum, I found myself back where I started: appreciating a "freedom not to know." Perhaps it is for this very reason that New Institutionalism has been so hotly contested. In order to value the type of engagement that this approach fosters, one must first relinquish his or her desire for definitive facts.²¹

Handle with care: Experimentation in museum displays in Italy in the 2000s

The last decade has seen some examples of experimentations with the permanent collections in museums of contemporary art in Italy, marking an almost simultaneous reception of the wider European debate. Despite this, a thorough theorization has seldom followed the exhibition test, and such projects have often not received the necessary attention, probably due to the weak position the national art system occupies within international dynamics. Interesting practices are therefore still registered as isolated experiences, the theoretical implications of which have not yet been studied, despite deserving critical analysis within the discourse of curatorial studies.

The weakness of the Italian contemporary art system is a hot topic in the country's internal debate, strongly felt among different operators in the field and often tackled in specialized journals, talks, and conferences. Only recently, however, has it entered the country's cultural policy agenda.

The reasons for this are many. Firstly, we can observe insufficient attention on the part of politics towards questions revolving around "the contemporary" in art. The establishment of a branch department of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities dedicated specifically to contemporary forms dates only to 2001, under the name DARC (Direzione per l'Arte e l'Architettura Contemporanea). In 2008 the department changed its name to Direzione per la Qualità e la Tutela del Paesaggio, l'Architettura e l'Arte Contemporanea, only to be renamed again as Direzione Generale Arte e Architettura Contemporanea e Periferie Urbane in 2014.

The nominal substitution is an expression of the difficulty this public body experiences in recognizing its own autonomous profile, the consequence of an immature political vision aimed at a managerial unification—often in response to purely economic demands—rather than the specialization of competences. The same shortsightedness has not only affected the funding intended for the sector, but has also shelved, extensively, the tax reform necessary for both the strengthening of the art market and the development of a full

collaboration between public and private in support of art institutions.

The practice of collecting is hindered by excessively high taxation (the value-added tax rate is currently 22 percent), while the first measures taken to sustain patronage in favor of the cultural sector are very recent. In 2014 the Ministry introduced the “art bonus,” a form of tax credit for free donations aimed at supporting cultural and museum heritage. In October 2016 the Ministry itself expressed the desire to set up an Italian Art Council, following the example of the British Council and the Mondriaan Fonds: a government agency that would coordinate the Italian Institutes of Culture abroad and work in synergy with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to a statement by Minister Dario Franceschini, “This organization will operate to enrich public collections through the promotion and acquisition of works by contemporary Italian artists, as well as to strengthen the presence of our authors on the international scene.” In the coming months we will witness the development of a project both necessary and very much longed for, as was clearly evident during the First Forum of Contemporary Italian Art, organized by the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art in September 2015.

The stagnation of adequate cultural policies committed to the contemporary scene presents itself within a wider tendency which, for years, has led to thinking of Italian culture mainly in terms of the conservation and safeguarding of its immense art historical heritage, thereby leading to less investment in strategies for experimental production and the valorization projects that hold the heritage itself as the primary object.

One example of this situation is the recent, rather heated debate concerning the rearrangement of the permanent collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, renamed La Galleria Nazionale. Cristiana Collu has been leading this institution since the summer of 2015, and was appointed by the aforementioned Minister Franceschini. The mandate fits in a reform concerning the national museum system, which has seen the emancipation of museums from local government supervisory agencies, as well as the nomination of twenty new directors. In October 2016 Collu reorganized the museum's permanent collection in a temporary exhibition, under the title *Time is Out of Joint*. The architectural space appears strongly renewed, the fruit of a renovation that returns space and light to the original architectural plan. The selection of works is very contained, in comparison to the previous display, and the overall exhibition layout is organized without any chronological order or explanatory wall texts; the combinations on view result from thematic or iconographic similarities. This radical change in the display caused the museum's scientific committee to revolt: two out of four members—art historians

Jolanda Nigro Covre and Claudio Zambianchi—resigned; a third, Fabio Benzi, wrote a letter to the minister to express his disagreement.

How much are we allowed to experiment with heritage in the Italian context? What was the extent of the experiment, and which critical-theoretical considerations are we able to draw from these experiences?

The first unorthodox experience was recorded at the GAM (Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, Turin), curated by director Danilo Eccher, whose experiments with the display of conceptual themes lasted two programming seasons, between 2009 and 2012, which recalls the Tate policy. In October 2009 he articulated the collection using the themes Genre, View, Childhood, and Mirroring; in March 2011 this became Anima, Information, Melancholy, and Language. During both programs, conceptual profiles were traced by academics external to the art world, albeit in dialogue with art historians, while the curatorial department of the museum indicated the selection of artworks for the exhibitions. The focus was mainly on modern and contemporary history, as well as more recent works and prints, which were presented in special outer sections, under the titles “Wunderkammer” and “Underground,” respectively. It was a first example of collective curatorship in Italy—an attempt to create a dialogue between the museum world and academia, a dialogue that wanted to break the historio-centric vision of the museum.

In recent years the concept of collection has been explored further, pursuing how the display mode could contribute to the identity of the museum.²² Presented here are the case studies of three temporary projects focusing on the redisplay of the museums’ permanent collections, chosen for the reflections they triggered through this new evidence of spatial heritage: *The Magnificent Obsession*, curated by Cristiana Collu at MART in Rovereto (October 2012 – February 2014); *Remembering is not Enough*, curated by Hou Hanru at MAXXI in Rome (December 2013 – September 2014); and *Per_forming a collection*, curated by Alessandro Rabottini and Eugenio Viola at Museo MADRE in Naples (June 2013 – ongoing).

MART: The collector’s obsession, the visitor’s abandon

In October 2012 MART (Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Rovereto) inaugurated an annual project around its permanent collection with a clearly citationist title, *The Magnificent Obsession*. The concept came from the new director, Cristiana Collu, and created an opportunity for reflection on the occasion of the institution’s tenth anniversary. More prosaically, it bridged the programming gap that occurred with the change of artistic direction at the museum.

The obsession she refers to is that of collecting, relentlessly and hyperbolically, thanks to which the museum's collection—comprising modern and contemporary works from the 1800s until today—has come together. In a single year a total of 2,784 objects from an archive of around 20,000 pieces are revealed to the museum's audience, in an exhibition area of about 3,800 square meters divided into thirty-four rooms (the quantitative data was part of the event press release).

The display reflects the manic urgency of accumulation—redundant, unorthodox, and overwhelming, in part—while creating for the viewer a deluge of the museum's collection, with an itinerary that looks like an “apocryphal art history” and mixes small productions with iconic works.

We wanted to avoid the déjà-vu of an exhibition reserved to masterpieces... quoting the pages of art history, blocked in a closed and unmovable itinerary, recognizable, reassuring, iconizing. So we tried to... tell a different story, developed on a binding that is chronological but speculative, constituted by multiple points of view, different but shared, searching for new and additional modes of connection and exposition of artworks.²³

Its itinerary is structured according to a fairly linear chronological evolution; even when missing precise references to artistic trends and movements, it is easy to follow the course of Italian art. For example, under the evocative title “Mediterraneo” we can find metaphysics and some experiences of a return to order. In this same line appear genre categories such as “Portrait” and “Landscape,” and space is given to interventions by living artists, such as Paco Cao and Emilio Isgrò—invited to work on the exhibition concept or give suggestions for individual rooms—and Liliana Moro, who was involved as a curator in this case.

The artistic interventions cannot be framed within the attitude of institutional critique—the director herself declares to have planned to construct an institutional reading far from ideologies and polemics—and the reflection on the collection is not animated by a political filter as much as by a desire to primarily promote an experiential actualization, one that is corporeal and intuitive, even before an interpretative-intellectual one. This approach pushes, on the one hand, the emotional vision of “climate areas” (tested by Tate Modern to the extreme), and on the other, it finds a personal process of experimentation of a certain radical didactic that seeks the pleasure of free learning through the methods and timings of individual sensitivity, as seen with the Van Abbemuseum. Precisely this unorthodox test of the museum experience is indicated by its creator, Collu, as a “dowsing” attitude that transforms the enjoyment into an *auto-da-fé*.

The gap occurs in the (visual) denial of the didactic apparatus that, instead of being placed on the wall, could

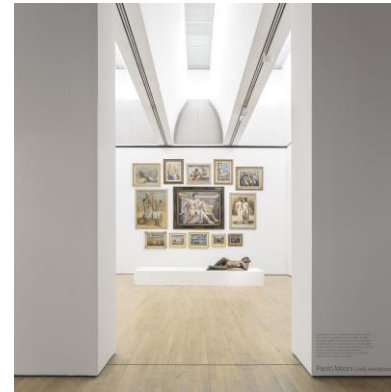


Fig. 1. *The Magnificent Obsession*, MART (Rovereto, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fernando Guerra

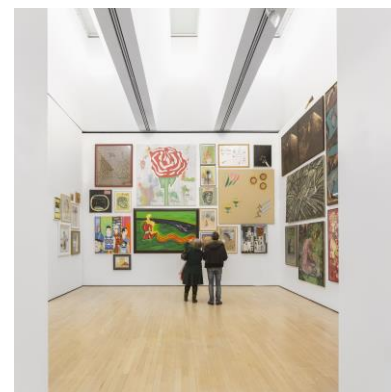


Fig. 2. *The Magnificent Obsession*, MART (Rovereto, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fernando Guerra.

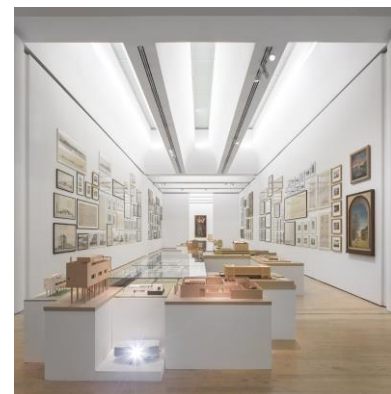


Fig. 3. *The Magnificent Obsession*, MART (Rovereto, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fernando Guerra.

only be enjoyed on paper, thanks to a little booklet, or by audio guide. In this way, not only does the view of the room appear clean, but it prevents the mediation of first contact with the visitor, entrusting it to pure feelings and personal background and knowledge.

The aim is not to avoid the strong, authoritative museum voice experimenting on the linguistic medium of the labels—which, in fact, are quite traditional, limited to technical data and short interpretive clues—but rather to try to develop a model that can put visitors in a position that enhances their perception and allows them to enter into a closer and more personal involvement with art. It is an experience-driven model, instead of an information-driven one, that creates a free-choice learning environment, although within the coordinates given by the curators. It is natural to wonder about the effectiveness of this type of presentation and its risk of visually overwhelming the viewer, abandoning him or her to the flow of images and objects.

The scholarly literature on the flow of images calls to mind historical formats, such as the *Wunderkammern* and *Salons* or, in terms of interpretation, the distinguished examples of André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire* and Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* (as is widely discussed in the essays in the catalog). Conversely, Collu recalls in her statement the display of *ex-voto* in Christian chapels or, to stay in contemporary terms, technological devices and web-streaming, which place a multitude of choices before the individual. Thus, when responding to doubts about an exhibitivite device such as this, she claims, "If we are able to decode the images in everyday life, why should we not be able to do it within the walls of a museum?"²⁴

The visitor is lifted from the psychological burden of unidirectional learning and is thus permitted to live in the space of the museum, to choose where to dwell without having the institution suggest the pace of the visit or the scale of values by which he or she should view the artworks. With this in mind, the project becomes a complex shared experiment that appears as such from its presupposition. *The Magnificent Obsession* emerges as an interesting option precisely from this perspective; a temporary suspension of institutional rigor, an organized anarchy that does not aim to reshape the perception of the community, but rather imagine new forms of individuality, for both the museum curator and the visitor.

The Magnificent Obsession constitutes the most experimental height of Cristiana Collu's controversial directorship at MART, which came to an end after only three years (2012–2015). Today the museum is under the direction of Gianfranco Marianello and the display of the permanent collection falls into orthodox museological canons.



Fig. 4. *The Magnificent Obsession*, MART (Rovereto, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fernando Guerra.

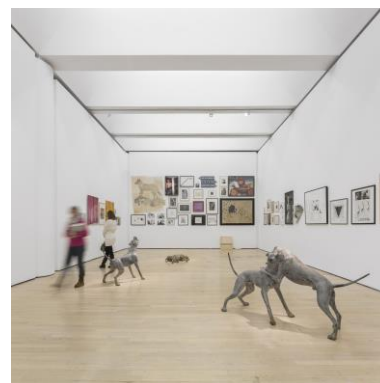


Fig. 5. *The Magnificent Obsession*, MART (Rovereto, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fernando Guerra

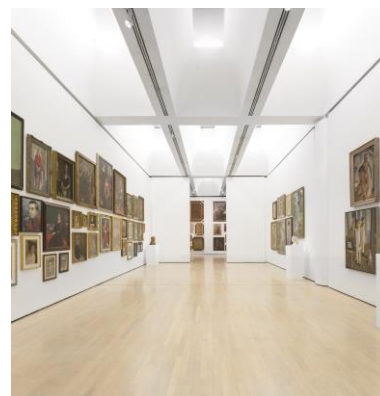


Fig. 6. *The Magnificent Obsession*, MART (Rovereto, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fernando Guerra.

MAXXI, *Remembering is not Enough*: On the verge of art and architecture

Since its opening in 2009, the MAXXI, National Museum of the 21st Century Arts, has been characterized by the union of two departments, MAXXI Arts and MAXXI Architecture. This second department, in particular, aims to represent the complexity of architecture beyond the formal elements of design and construction, in order to investigate its position and effects on the environmental and sociocultural context. The same speculative goal is at the foundation of the exhibition *Remembering is not Enough*, curated by Hou Hanru, artistic director of the museum since 2013, in his first experience covering this role.

The exhibition of the MAXXI collection emphasizes the necessity to embrace a more open vision and dynamic approach to develop and manifest the collection of the museum: not only conserving and presenting some excellent works from history and contemporary times, but moreover activating a living process in which the memories of history are continuously reconstructed in order to provide new vitality that keeps the work alive so that it continues to produce meaningful inspiration for us to understand our own time.²⁵

In order to build this vision, the collections of the two departments are merged for the first time in a unique display, creating dialogue and interaction between the two disciplines, with the addition of site-specific works by artists invited to contribute. In this dialogue lies the main contribution of the operation: usually architecture—urban models, architectural models, archival documents—is exhibited in special sections at the extremities of museum itineraries (think about how the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou is staged, where Le Corbusier the architect and Le Corbusier the visual artist are presented in separate sections). Even when a relationship is traced, this is confined to a room, such as the “Architecture, construction, reconstruction” of *The Magnificent Obsession*, in which architecture as a subject is the protagonist, with a few artworks inserted as a visual corollary—almost a decorative accompaniment to the main narrative.

In the case of *Remembering is not Enough*, however, the duo forms the backbone of the entire itinerary, divided in macro-themes of “universal character” for the individual—body, soul, and spirit—and society: the way to experience the city and public space, environmental sustainability, and geopolitical and social issues. The themes touch upon political urgency; by electing them as points for reflection, the institution assumes the responsibility of uniting the community of visitors under common (and evocative) themes such as “The Theater of the World”, “The City between order and chaos”, “Infrastructural miracles.” Still, the spatial rhythm of the display does not record experimentations, and the display design focuses on an already complex dialogue with the architecture of Zaha Hadid. The transdisciplinary approach that dissolves



Fig. 7. *Remembering is not Enough*, MAXXI (Rome, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fondazione MAXXI, photo: M3Studio.



Fig. 8. *Remembering is not Enough*, MAXXI (Rome, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fondazione MAXXI, photo: M3Studio.



Fig. 9. *Remembering is not Enough*, MAXXI (Rome, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fondazione MAXXI, photo: M3Studio.



Fig. 10. *Remembering is not Enough*, MAXXI (Rome, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Fondazione MAXXI, photo: M3Studio.

categories and the political focus given to the sections constitute the peculiar elements of the operation, responding to a common will to change perspective on the collection: firstly, the way we catalog the collection in rigid categories, without highlighting interconnections; secondly, the way in which the collection can be the device itself, and thus function as a critical tool that pushes the discussion forward, triggering a process of signification where the artwork also retains practical value as a discursive fuse.

This processuality is referenced in the title, together with the need to overcome a strictly conservative approach to the collection—and thus also the preponderant weight assigned to memory and the recollection of the past—so that this experience can acquire social and political value.

MADRE: *Per_forming a collection*, between local and global

The project *Per_forming a collection*, curated by Alessandro Rabottini and Eugenio Viola at MADRE, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina in Naples, started in June 2013 and is still in progress after four editions. It represents a new beginning for the museum after the uncertainties that marked the interregnum between former director Eduardo Cicelyn and his successor, Andrea Villani (2011–2012), which consistently influenced the shape of the permanent collection. Under the direction of Cicelyn, in fact, the collection was to a large extent comprised of long-term loans that mostly depended on the director's own personal network rather than the generosity of collectors. When a misunderstanding between Cicelyn and the regional government led to a directorship turnover, the trust between collectors and the museum fell apart and the institution was forced to relinquish a large portion of its patrimony. Villani, the new director, was faced with the task of reconstructing the collection and thus the identity of the museum itself.

The wordplay contained in the title—the intersection between “to form” and “to perform”—recalls the theories developed by Dorothea Von Hantelmann on the categorization of performative in art as a methodological key useful to understanding the character of those works presenting an authorial gesture as a strong desire of acting on the conditions in which the artwork is located, both in space-discursive and relational terms with the viewer.²⁶ In this sense the exhibition title clarifies the will to present the history of the collection the way it was built, from the historical acquisitions to the recent ones that occurred on the occasion of the project, and how this method can be used as a critical device to investigate the multiplicity of interpretations of reality and the effects of these same speculations.

Per_forming a collection insists on the sociopolitical role of the institution, and in particular, as explained by



Fig. 11. *Per_forming a collection* #4, Museo MADRE (Naples, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Amedeo Benestante.

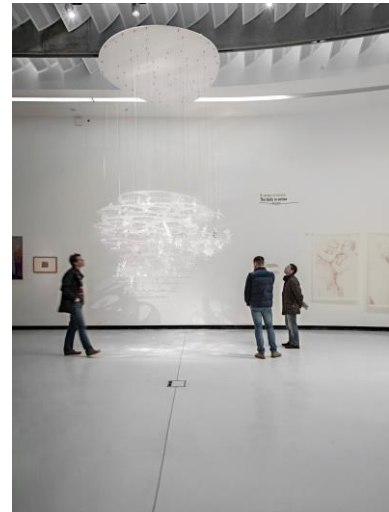


Fig. 12. *Per_forming a collection* #4, Museo MADRE (Naples, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Amedeo Benestante.



Fig. 13. *Per_forming a collection* #4, Museo MADRE (Naples, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Amedeo Benestante.

the curator Eugenio Viola, on how the collection of a museum should “reflect the identity, express the history of the land on which it stands, and place it in dialectical relationship between the national and international reality.”²⁷

The local context—Naples and the Campania region—is placed at the center, reconstructing its place as an artistic hub since the 1960s, thanks to the action of important personalities such as gallerists Lucio Amelio, Marcello and Lia Rumma, and the critics Filiberto Menna and Achille Bonito Oliva, while weaving the thread of a national and international narrative starting from historical events.

Here the archive earns a primary role, with documents creating a dialogue with artworks. The display often responds to a principle of simultaneity, fostering a macro-narrative of artistic production of the last fifty years integrated with artists that are geographically peripheral to the Anglo-Saxon hegemonic axis but at the same time perfectly in line with relevant research questions. For example, in the context of conceptual art, the research of Joseph Kosuth and Robert Berry is put into dialogue with that of Carlo Alfano and Vincenzo Agnetti.

In the project an exhibition policy has been deployed that overturns both the homogenizing logic of globalized contemporary art as well as an overly simplistic analytical approach for “area-studies”: here the national and the international dimensions are intertwined and define each other. The common point, in fact, never deals with geography but rather key issues entwined in Western artistic practice after 1968: the artwork as a participatory and symbolic action, the role of language in the artistic space, the ephemeral and the dramatization of the artwork, the relationship between tradition, folklore, and craftsmanship and the return to painting, the link between archaism and digitalism, and the role of history in the art system. The artist and his or her research are therefore the core of the dialogue between local and global, analyzed thanks to the institution’s approach to what has characterized the cultural history of the area to which it belongs. In doing so, the museum learns from the community and institutionalizes the practice, recovering it with new tools and devices.

With a cross-disciplinary approach that combines teaching and planning vocations with narrative and performative ones, the collection comes to life and, in the intentions of the curators, becomes a “living organism, that grows and is divided in time... never a complete story, always susceptible to new references and insights.”²⁸

Conclusion

The three experiences introduced here each face the identity of the twenty-first-century art museum differently,



Fig. 14. *Per_ forming a collection #4*, Museo MADRE (Naples, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Amedeo Benestante.



Fig. 15. *Per_ forming a collection #4*, Museo MADRE (Naples, IT), exhibition view. Credit: Amedeo Benestante.

experimenting with the possibilities of displaying—and therefore utilizing—the permanent collection according to an expositive logic of temporality. Firstly, the differentiation between artworks and archive documents appears outdated: both are welcomed in the exhibition area, albeit with different degrees of integration. In addition, the three exhibitions are united by a rejection of the hegemonic narrative and a desire to develop projects through an authorship ensemble that, besides the artistic director-creator, also includes curators, artists invited to produce new and conceptually site-specific artworks complying to the exhibitiv reflection, and the audience itself, which is urged to actively respond to anticanonical display strategies.

Bound by this methodology, every institution pursues a personal perspective through single projects. In the case of *The Magnificent Obsession* it seeks a sensorial perception both in front of the image and along the path through the exhibition space; in *Remembering is not Enough* it is the dialectic between “I” and “us,” between individual and social body; in *Per_forming a collection* it concentrates on similarities and differences between artistic productions in geographic contexts and how these can become a focal point for identity, not only for a museum but also for a whole territory.

Above all, the three projects work in a political sphere. These experiences can, in fact, be placed within the theoretical framework of Rancière’s aesthetic regime. The fruition of a work (and a show) becomes the experience that can be transformed into an imaginative ability to redesign the individual and his or her relationship to the world (i.e., the shift from individuality to collectivity).

With these three projects, the museums have chosen to act as a privileged place for this emancipatory condition, whether through a sensorial experience (MART), an experience of the community space in which we move (MAXXI), or our lived historical-geographical space and the way the latter exists in a wider system (MADRE). Furthermore, each museum takes upon itself the civic responsibility of being an institution. The intent behind these performative projects allows us to put the three exhibitions in contact, and thus also the institutions that produced them, with the reflections of New Institutionalism, recognizing their will to speculate and experiment with a different system of the production-consumption-display of cultures, where error serves as a guarantee for critique and failure is production.

Bringing together these experiences, until today perceived as unrelated, alongside a wider European-oriented thought, creates a reflexive terrain that is useful for the reinforcement of the Italian curatorial debate. The establishment of a stronger and more conscious critical and theoretical national discourse will enable the activation of a more attentive gaze towards the “contemporary,” a new, fruitfully dialectical relation to cultural heritage, and progressively contribute to

directing adequate cultural policies in favor of the contemporary art system.

Micaela Deiana, PhD in the Science of Cultural Systems, is an independent art curator and researcher. Her investigations focus on curatorial studies, history of exhibitions, and the process of transformation in contemporary art museums. She holds a BA in Cultural Heritage and an MA in Art History from the University of Cagliari, and an MA in Curating and Museum Display from the La Sapienza University of Rome. She collaborates with various Universities and is Teaching Assistant at UniNettuno University in Rome. She works as editor for several art journals, such as *Flash Art* and *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, and as a curator she cooperates with institutions and nonprofit art spaces. She is a member of ICOM-Italy and the Youth Committee of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO.

1. Debora J. Meijers, "The museum and the 'ahistorical exhibitions'. The latest gimmick by the arbiters of taste, or an important cultural phenomenon?," in *Place, Position, Presentation, Public*, ed. Ine Gevers (Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Akademie, 1992), 28–40. About this topic also: Paul O'Neill, "The Curators as the Author of Exhibitions in the Late 1980s," in *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 27–32.
2. Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artist Reflect*, exh. cat. (New York: MoMA, 1999) and J. Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 66–89.
3. Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996). Similar to the dialectic between interpretation (of the curator) and experience (of the audience) is the one articulated by Rosalind Krauss between encyclopedic and synchronic museum, see R. Krauss, "Postmodernism's Museum without walls," in *Thinking about exhibitions*, eds. R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson, and S. Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 320–347.
4. The solution adopted by Nicolas Serota has as a precedent the redisplay of 1998 at MoMA in New York, which later became a reference for other experiences, such as Centre Pompidou in Paris (2005) and the Modern Art Gallery of Turin in Italy (2009). On subsequent display strategies later installed by Tate Modern, see F. Morris, "Permanent evolution," *The Exhibitionist* 5 (2012): 37–39; M. Borja-Villel, F. Morris, "To Have and to Hold," *The Exhibitionist* 8 (2013): 6–17; T. J. Demos, "The Tate Effect," in *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets and Museums*, eds. H. Belting, et al. (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2009), 78–87.
5. Borja-Villel and Morris, "To Have and to Hold," 9.
6. Morris, "Permanent evolution," 39.
7. S. Rolling, "Fresh Breeze in the Depots - Curatorial Concepts in Reinterpreting Collections," *OnCurating* 12 (2001): 25.
8. Mari Carmen Ramírez, "The Dilemma of 'activating' the permanent collection, or, how to thaw the frozen assets," *The Exhibitionist* 5 (2012): 43–46.
9. Selected references: Claire Doherty, "The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," *Engage* 15 (2005): 6–32; Claire Doherty, "New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation," in *Protections Reader*, ed. Adam Budak (Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2006), 1; Jonas Ekeberg, ed., *New Institutionalism*, Verksted 1 (Oslo:

- Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003); Alex Farquharson, "Bureaux de Change," *Frieze* 101 (2006): 156–160; Nina Möntmann, ed., *Arts and its Institutions: Current conflicts, critique and collaborations* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006); "(New)Institution(alism)," *OnCurating* 21 (2014).
10. Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology* (London: Koening Books, 2013), 27.
 11. See "ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums," accessed December 12, 2016, http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/code_et_hics2013_eng.pdf.
 12. Marjatta Hölz, "Fresh breeze in the depots – curatorial concepts for reinterpreting collections," *OnCurating* 12 (2011): 2.
 13. The term emerged from the round table discussion at "From Plug In to Play: A Conversation with Sven Lütticken, Christian Berndes, Charles Esche, Annie Fletcher, Diana Franssen, and Steven ten Thije," in *Plug In to Play*, exh. cat., eds. A. Fletcher, et al. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2009), 79.
 14. Kamila Wielebska, "The Cultural memory machine, in conversation with Charles Esche," *Intertekst.com*, accessed June 2016, http://www.intertekst.com/218_artykul.html?jezyk=en.
 15. J. Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Parigi: Éditions Galilée, 2004);
 16. Jacques Rancière reported this thesis in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, envisioning how emancipation must follow the dignity of being a man and his "ability to measure his intellectual capability and to decide on its use." The museum then should not propose itself as a teacher, but should provide occasions of experience able to reawaken in the visitor auto-determination of forms and time, of his ability to learn. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
 17. The discursive potential of the permanent exhibition is also enriched by temporary exhibitions that, instead of characterizing themselves as autonomous projects—even if meeting the demand of Madrid's touristic market with big names—would thematically develop the official narration in a digressive form, proposing follow-up and confrontation meetings.
 18. Borja-Villel and Morris, "To Have and to Hold," 11.
 19. Fletcher, et al., *Plug In to Play*, 5.
 20. For a report of all the interventions, see Fletcher, et al., *Plug In to Play*.
 21. Alison Burstein, "'Freedom Not to Know': New Institutional Approaches at W139, Witte de With and Van Abbemuseum," *Inside/Out: A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog*, August 19, 2013, accessed June 2016, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2013/08/19/freedom-not-to-know-new-institutional-approaches-at-w139-witte-de-with-and-van-abbemuseum.
 22. The topic has been at the center of a debate, also on the occasion of the 1st Forum on Italian contemporary art, organized by the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art in September 2015. One platform of discussion, curated by Lorenzo Giusti and myself, regarded the contemporary art institution; the panelists focused their attention on the collection as the core of the museum identity.
 23. Veronica Canciulli, "Dall'altra parte," *La magnifica ossessione: Autodidatta, rbdomante, auto da fé di opere*, exh. cat. (Rovereto: 2012), 147 (my translation).
 24. Ibid.
 25. Hou Hanru, exhibition statement.
 26. Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art* (Zürich: JRP|Ringier, 2010). The title clearly declares an homage to John Austin's theory of linguistic acts.
 27. Eugenio Viola, "Museo Madre: Per formare una collezione / Intervista con i curatori," *ATPdiary.com*, February 20, 2015, accessed December 12, 2016, http://atpdiary.com/exhibit/per_formare-una-collezione-madre.
 28. Ibid.