

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CULTURAL POLICIES OF 21ST CENTURY MODERN ART MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the challenge of sustainability through from the perspective of the recent cultural policies chosen by modern art museums. It analyzes what is the meaning and use of this word in the museum context and which strategies shall modern art museums adopt to ensure sustainable long-term cultural policies. Which are the challenges that modern art museums shall engender to provide long-term sustainable cultural policies in the early 21st century? First, museums may think about developing on-line business models capable to differentiate off- and on-line services. Secondly, they may act proactively and promote initiatives that generate culture besides the original core mission of exhibiting artworks. Finally, they may rethink about documentation practices and exhibition making processes in a way that is updated to the transformations of the 21st century society.

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INTRODUCTION

'one holds on sustainability when nothing else holds any longer'.

Johachim Heinrich Campe, 1809, German Dictionary Edition¹

In recent years, sustainability has become a recurrent *leitmotiv* in the art museum management to develop strategies and perform procedures and practices differently. In times of economic, political and social instability as well as declining and marginal public funding, modern art museums have been assigned a role as forums for 'therapeutic conversations' (Silvermann, 2004; Koster, 2012) where to discuss issues that matter to contemporary society. They have developed complex models based on intelligent balance between serving their core mission consisting in preserving cultures while also generating new forms of knowledge. At the same time, they have responded to the increasing economic constraints caused by market turbulence with practical solutions. More than other institutions, modern art museums have experienced the need of structural and administrative transformations to ensure their survival and sustainability in a future cultural scenario that has been radically subjected to changes. For the purposes of this research that analyzes

¹ Grober, Ulrich. 2012. *Sustainability. A Cultural History*, Devon, Green Books p. 9.

management's and policies' challenges, modern art museums are presented as territories for experiments and innovative practices (Macleod, Hourston Hanks and Hale, 2012; Maricola, 2006). As opposed to historical galleries or universal museums, modern art museums are prompt for their nature to question normative and established exhibition canons, propose innovative museological contents and museographical displays and generate cultural initiatives that look at art history from heterogeneous perspectives (Greenberg, Ferguson, Nairne, 1996: 175-190). On the one hand, the issue of sustainability has been extrinsically linked to art museums as much as these institutions operate for the sustainable common good of the community. On the other hand, art museums have considered sustainability from the so called 'three bottom' approach already engendered by corporations, business companies or enterprises in recent years. This approach demands preserving and improving social and environmental conditions while also safeguarding financial health. In a so called 'three-bottom' approach, museums' pursuit for environmental, economic and social sustainability is related to their eligibility for funding and it is indeed an economic rather than a cultural issue. Funding comes to museums when stakeholders' preference in the art museums' offering depends on how attractive is its brand image and diversified its cultural program (Collins and Porras, 1994, 1996). Though, sustainable cultural policies do not concern the mere adoption of simple environmental practices such as reducing the waste of energies or recycling the exhibition material, but encourage embracing different behaviors among staff members, stakeholders, partners, sponsors, visitors and users. Modern art museums face the challenge of technology and compete against entertainment businesses trying to develop innovative business models to make the difference among cultural competitors. In this context, the concept of 'sustainability' has come in use as synonymous for long-term cultural policy's strategies. As acknowledged by Harold Skramstad during the Smithsonian Institute 150th anniversary, institutions exist for their distinctive ability to provide 'value for the society in a way that builds on unique institutional strengths and senses unique community needs' (Smithsonian Institution, 1997: 33-55). The aim of cultural institutions shall be changing social behaviors as well as power relationships between stakeholders. For this reason, concepts such as sustainability come with instances likewise 'making the difference' or 'value-add' language. From a managerial perspectives, art museums are defined as 'effective' organizations (Griffin, Abraham, 2007), i. e. corporations or institutions whose aim is to positively affect stakeholders' lives. Though, how modern art museums can make the difference within the current society? How can they ensure the sustainability of their cultural policy among competitors in the 21st century cultural and artistic environment?

SUSTAINABILITY CULTURE AND ART MUSEUMS: LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability is a concept usually considered under the above mentioned ‘three-bottom approach’ (environmental, economic and social perspectives). It implies the adaptive renewal of systems (nature, economy, society, organizations and institutions) to external changes in the environment, but definitions as well as measurable indicators have not been clearly characterized yet (Worts, 2011). However, sustainable management of art museum concerns several issues which go further simply meeting the challenges of climate changes or developing strategies to face economic constraints. In recent years, this concept has become a recurrent point in industries’, governments’ and business corporations’ agendas. Business companies’ sustainability brands have effectively proved to strengthen relationships between stakeholders, customers and enterprises. In order to measure the effectiveness of these business strategies, in two-year period 2011- 2012 the consultant society Brandlogic produced a document *Sustainability Leadership Report* to analyze how business corporations such as Unilever, Bloomberg, McKinsey, GE, l’Oréal, Dell or Deutsche Bank had developed and consequently adopted sustainability policies. These companies had created ‘sustainability charts’ to ‘green-wash’ their actions and differentiate their procedures and mission from those of their competitors. Both they and their stakeholders had come to understand that the label of sustainability was a combination of environmental stewardship, social responsibility and corporate governance. In management, these three aspects are often grouped and addressed as the ‘ESG’ (Environmental, Social and Governance) factor. Normally, this factor is used to measure and analyze real corporations’ sustainability performance and stakeholders’ perception of it (Brandlogic, 2012: 1- 20). Nonetheless, even if a company may accomplish a highly sustainable performance, stakeholders may still be unaware of it due to the lack of brand communication. In 2008, the UK Museum Association (MA) has aligned its mission towards sustainability trends and has held a forum entitled *Sustainability and Museums* to discuss the implications this concept had in relation to art and science museums. After the forum’s conclusion, MA published on-line a *Sustainability Checklist* as helpful handout for directors, staff and curators of national as well as international museums. The checklist encouraged practitioners to look at the importance of developing sustainability strategies within their internal management. Questions explored whether and to what extent museums staff members were required to account for sustainability in day-to-day decision making-processes (MA, 2008: 1-14). Besides suggestions which encouraged practitioners pursuing sustainable environmental practices, the list stressed the importance of building strong networks and

partnerships with third parties that would ensure the existence of museums even though funding would be cut or simply diminished. Museums practitioners have striven to recycle exhibition materials creating on-line platforms such as the Dutch *museumplaats* to encourage staff members buying past exhibition equipment on eBay-like auctions (www.museumplaats.nl). At the same time, they have fostered alternative collection management practices based on principles of disposal and decentralization from central museums to suburban branches. This operation served to revitalize specific geographical areas and spur tourism and commerce (Janes, 2009; Petterson, Hagedorn-Saupe, Jyrkkio, Weijd, 2005). Despite rhetoric on changing collection management, European art museums as well as international associations (AAC, ICOM) have dynamically explored the opportunities offered by networking with other museums, cultural institutions and commercial businesses (Petterson, Hagedorn-Saupe, Jyrkkio, Weijd, 2005; www.tate.org.uk). The increasing diffusion of the Internet has given these collaborations a tremendous boost (Petterson, Hagedorn-Saupe, Jyrkkio, Weijd, 2005). These networks have fostered environmental and economic perspectives on the art museums sustainability, but, at the same time, they have strengthened social networks among museum practitioners inciting relationships based on mutual trust and reliability. However, museum practitioners have acknowledged that discourses about sustainability were connected to the increasing democratization of artistic production caused by the web and implied some changes in stakeholders' mutual power relationships. To be really sustainable, art museums shall embrace different challenges brought by changes in the political, social, environmental and economic contexts; also, they shall have a clear long-term mission that reflects society's expectations about this kind of institutions. Though, where do modern art museums find the responses to present and future challenges in relation to other cultural institutions, media and events that lay claim to people's attention?

SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL POLICIES: DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The concept of sustainability is frequently linked to ideas such as 'making the difference' in a specific context and 'value-branding'. In recent years, modern art museums have branded themselves as culture-generators and have attracted investments from third-parties. Though art museums are not business corporations, some directors have gradually started looking at business-like-models to come up with solutions that would ensure economic sustainability- still keeping both symbolic and educational functions

(Fraser, 2006: 86). Practitioners and scholars have come to admit the need of creating and branding a cultural policy that could appeal sponsors, on-line users and visitors. Strategic cultural policies can in fact support the various activities the museum pursues outside and inside the venue (Debbaut, 2011). New aspects challenge modern art museums' cultural policies; in the following section, I analyze three of these aspects looking at the approaches adopted by European art museums, though focusing my methodology and my data on British and Danish contexts which I know from experience.

Aspect 1: Differentiating Off-line and On-line Museum Business Models

Certainly, one of the key challenge in modern art museums business models consists in developing high quality on-line services that enrich and broaden- instead of simply advertise- the activities proposed by the museum *in situ* (Carugati, Goethals, Leclercq, Hadziliadis, 2011). On-line procedures spur art museums to classify collection with different methodologies from those traditionally used. On-line opportunities enable museums to develop alternative narratives and present the collection in a more attractive but also critical perspective. On a practical level, the ambition to have and keep updated websites has created new forms of employment under museums IT departments. On a theoretical level, blogs, on-line radio channels, courses, games and platforms have gradually put aside the museum's authoritative role and democratized meaning making and knowledge production. On the one hand, on-line users have been offered the possibility to download high quality resolution images directly from the museums' websites both for academic and private use. However, this operation is definitively easier to accomplish in historical galleries such as the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), the Prado Museum (Madrid) and the Statens Museum for Kunst (Copenhagen) rather than in modern art museums due to copyright restrictions. Interestingly, these historical galleries have opened on-line services where users can order images prints on demand but also use digital reproductions for private purposes such as creating stickers, mugs, t-shirts, calendars as suggested by the Rijksmuseum. On the other hand, art museums have exploited the web to create virtual communities through blogs where people do not simply comment what curators have posted, but rather they participate in the co-creation of museum meaning making. Among European art museums, British art museums stand out for their inspiring and high-developed on-line strategies which go further advertising the off-line activities of the institution. Tate Modern offers a great variety of on-line options that range from buying on-line drawing courses for 20

pounds, downloading educational material for elementary and high schools, watching the artists' interviews or learning about British and international art history by exploring the collections through on-line guided tours with skilled curators. Besides the various blogs and videos available on-line, Tate Modern has created an on-line community (Tate Community) joined by young people who spontaneously organize lectures, events and meet ups in the Tate's four venues. Tate Community serves as a social network for people interested in sharing ideas and reflections on art, but also materials and documentation connected to art history courses held either at Tate's venues or at the University College of London. In addition, visitors can download on-line a variety of apps that give an overview of the backstage work behind the exhibition setting. In Denmark, SMK has started a blog where digital users can decide which artworks they would like to add to the digital images collection and which, instead, they would prefer viewing while bodily visiting the museum (www.smk.dk/en/explore-the-art/smk-blogs/). Whereas, Louisiana Museum has recently developed an on-line channel sponsored by Nordea Fonden where the museum broadcasts lectures, concerts, interviews with curators, artists or designers and events (like the annual Louisiana Literature Festival) that have taken place at the museum venue in the past (www.louisiana.dk/uk/Menu/Louisiana+Channel).

Aspect 2: Acting As Generator Of Cultural Initiatives

However, modern art museums keep the designation of 'modern' when they also generate initiatives that produce 'modern' culture, even though these are apparently detached from exhibiting artworks or developing artistic initiatives. Despite the fact that some art historians disapprove the art museums' increasing attention on initiatives that are indeed very far from collection's care, we shall admit that notions of art and culture have also changed leading to a consequently re-evaluation of the services and core purposes that museums offer. Thus, to impact society while actively generate cultural and artistic forms, art museums have begun offering initiatives which go further offering additional services to the exhibition of artworks and the creation of educational services. Besides providing lectures, jazz concerts, film projections or gala dinners, modern art museums have either proposed to have Sunday yoga classes within their spaces, hold aperitifs in the museum's café or host private events likewise weddings, corporations' annual meetings, receptions and conferences. These practices have become very popular in American art museums like Brooklyn Museum, Princeton University Art Museum or in Canadian institutions like the AGO Art Gallery of Ontario.

Nonetheless in Europe similar trends are not widespread, some of the modern art museums have tried to support and actively participate to cultural and artistic festivals organized by local municipalities to integrate each other's activity. Positive collaborations in the Danish context have been reported in past years between Staten Museum for Kunst and the annual Copenhagen Kulturnatten as well as by ARoS Museum and Aarhus Festsuge. In other parts of Europe, the most common form of collaboration have resulted in modern art museums prolonging their opening hours or hosting concerts, theatrical pieces and artistic performances during the so-called 'white-city' nights. Nevertheless, there are other entrepreneurial examples showing how modern art museums have striven to generate culture through initiatives not strictly aimed at showing art. These museums have created their own 'cultural/artistic' brand by hosting in their venue festivals and events dedicated to literature, music, cinema and artistic performances. These appointments have become a landmark within both national and international cultural context as demonstrated by the case of Louisiana Literature Festival, which started in 2010 as a minor 'local' event, though, it gradually turned into one of the most renowned international appointments. Originally, the festival was conceived to promote Danish writers, poets and essayists and facilitate their contacts and networks with national and international editors, journalists, radios and TV channels as well as to favor their closer contact with readers. Today, Louisiana Literature Festival is one of the leading literature events and its past programs have included renowned writers such as Patti Smith in 2012 or Ian McEwan in 2013. These branding initiatives are strategic for institutions that want to outreach and not simply try to engage the community in what practitioners would like to do - which consists, indeed, in inspiring people's creativity while transmitting and shaping knowledge. These initiatives require to the museum's director, curators and educators a great flexibility in their mind-thinking. Such flexibility usually comes from working with staff members that have heterogeneous experiences and also differentiated backgrounds - as it is the case for Louisiana Museum. Though, promoting diverse initiatives attract not only diversified audiences, but also a range of sponsors and stakeholders that support the museum's initiatives avoiding its over-reliance on a single source of funding. Louisiana, for example, gets funding from different sponsors for each activity or event it promotes; Augustinus Fonden and Museum Fonden support the collection's maintenance and exhibitions' organization, Bodum, Realdania and Nykredit the Architectural and Contemporary art projects and Det Obleske Familiefond contributes for evening concerts and Friday Lounge. As stated by Louisiana website, being a sponsor of the museum means entering into a vital collaboration with the institution, with respect for general

‘arm-length principles’ and a desire to use the facilities. However, private sponsorships function better in countries where contributions as well as donations or legacies are favored by tax exemptions as it is the case of Denmark, United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the USA. In England, art museums are publicly funded by the Art Council and receive the national lottery money. Nevertheless, they stand out for their fundraising campaigns that aim at supporting economically on-line projects, tours, workshops, visits and initiatives, considering the fact that the access to the collection is free of charge. In order to reach collaborations with privates and incite their patronage towards the museum’s initiatives, the British Museums as well as Tate Modern have settled campaigns to advertise how appealing and fruitful may be becoming a sponsor of the museum. This kind of ‘promotional’ business model, which combines advertisement and commercial purposes, has been also embraced by other European museums such as Museo del Prado and SMK. In the case of Tate Modern, the museum has carefully stated on its website objectives, benefits and results if sponsors may join one of the options proposed. Among the sponsorship proposals advertised for corporative businesses there are alternatives that go from a multi-strand partnership - likewise the one joined by BP - to a brand-building solution; the latter was chosen by Unilever when in 2000 it started financing the Turbine Hall projects. Corporations can also opt for a business-to-business or staff incentives’ sponsorship. McKinsey Company and Vodafone have embraced both these solutions to offer free tours, special openings and bookshops or restaurant’s facilities not only to their clients, but mostly to their personnel and staff members. The reasons why corporations should invest money on museums’ cultural initiatives are various, but all are related to offer benefits and improve the life quality of the company employees. Though, even museums receive positive incentives from these sponsorships; they incite them to be creative and foster collaborative strategies while also developing innovative cultural initiatives that emphasize the museum global outlook and long-term binding policies.

Aspect 3: Providing New Documentation Processes and Revising Narratives

Nonetheless in the last twenty years art museums have concentrated their activities and policies towards satisfying visitors' needs and expectations, modern art museums have also been asked to update and constantly revise the content, layout and purpose of their temporary exhibitions and collection displays. In this context, the brand of sustainability has been used and purported to incite deep thinking about museums

functions and internal organization. Certainly, claiming for a sustainable management has encouraged institutions to become more flexible and adapt to new forms of organization, where information is communicated by means of different channels. Museums' curators, registrars, educators and practitioners have acknowledged that new technologies have influenced traditional methodologies in documenting and classifying artworks. Consequently, practitioners have been asked to adopt alternative approaches (Worts, 2011). For example, museum curators and educators have begun proposing innovative narratives while also developing displays and contexts that look modern and contemporary art beyond historical perspectives to purposely incite criticism and challenge established practices. At the same time, they also felt the need to explain what their work is about and show how their decisions may shape the image and the policies of their museums (Cameron, 2009: 80-95). In this perspective, Tate Modern has developed eleven-week interdisciplinary course entitled *Inside Today's Museum*, which is open to all kind of participants and allow people to get a deeper insight on the museum's backstage work. In recent years, it has become more and more evident that long-term sustainable cultural policies did not rely so much just upon updating displays, creating alternative narratives, 'green-washing' environmental practices or proving accountability of economic outcomes, which are indeed good and remarkable objectives for museums. On the contrary, sustainable policies are based on developing alternative practices for the artworks' documentation, creating narratives and thinking about new forms of display. Sustainability cultural policies in modern art museums imply that institutions shall not only transport meanings through educational activities, artistic exhibitions and cultural events, but also transform social behaviors and cultural views (Latour, 2005). Thus, how can we get collections documentation up to speed with current thinking bearing in mind the potentials offered by new managerial models, leadership strategies and also digital technologies? Modern art museums shall not step down their role of transmitting authoritative information, but they must think how to present the fragmentary, arbitrary and plural nature of objects' interpretation. To pursue this task, curators shall recognize that museum visitors have been replaced by museum users (see also: Bradburne, 2001), and that this shift has given a great interpretative freedom to documentary practices (Cameron, 2009). Museums' image may shift from that of scholarly learning environments into that of critical spaces inciting questioning approaches. Why this shift in perspectives may ensure modern art museum sustainability is likely related to the fact that, nowadays, people ask for different approaches both to history and historical narratives. As much as the web and crowd sources have offered to people the chance to contribute to knowledge creation, modern

art museums shall develop projects, practices, layouts and exhibition displays that allow people to understand how the art museum create knowledge and how can they contribute to it. There is no doubt that users will continue to look at curators and collection managers as those in charge to provide authoritative scholarly information in the forms of authoritarian statements, narrations or chronological frameworks. However, the transformation of documentation practices and exhibitions' processes will respond to the on-going institutional reframing process that touch every institution. But as recognized by Fiona Cameron, it is fundamental 'to convince the internal management structure of the epistemological, educational, marketing and cultural value of re-organizing documentation processes and exhibiton making'and, consequently, to commit substantial resources to it (Cameron, 2009).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, modern art museums may develop sustainable cultural policies improving first their on-line business models to integrate and implement – and not simply advertise- the cultural proposal of museums. Besides that, it is important that these art museums act as hybrid institutions generating culture through additional initiatives that look at art from a broader perspective. Though, to develop new approaches towards artistic perspectives and constantly regenerate their cultural offer, it is strategic for museum policies that staff members have different backgrounds. Only under these conditions, practitioners can embrace a more entrepreneurial, innovative and democratic vision to develop new procedures and narrative making processes that may ensure the sustainability of modern art museums cultural policies in the 21st century.

Irene Campolmi is PhD student at Aarhus University where she pursues a research project about *The Challenges of Art Museums in the 21st Century* co-financed and supported by Louisiana Museum in Humlebæk, where she also works as a research collaborator. Currently, Irene is also associated scholar in the Max-Planck-Research Group "Objects in the Contact Zone: The Cross-Cultural Life of Things", coordinated by Prof. Dr Eva-Maria Troelenberg. In 2012, she was a Max Planck-Institut-Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz fellow and PhD Candidate in *Management and Development of Cultural Heritage* at IMT Institute for Advanced Studies Lucca. She has teaching experiences at Syracuse University in Florence, New York University in Florence and FUA Florence University of Arts. In the last year, she has focused her research on sustainability practices and sustainable development in art museums and has held international seminars and conferences in Canada, Switzerland, Ireland, Denmark and France on this topic. Recently, she is interested in museums' on-line business models, management structure and documentation processes as components of a general analysis about modern art museums long-term strategies and cultural policies.

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