

## *THE MUSEUM COMES HOME: A MANIFESTO*

In 2002, renowned Smithsonian scholar Stephen Weil proposed a revolution: The public, and not the museum, will occupy the superior position -- the historical dialectic would be reversed.<sup>1</sup> For me, his ideas immediately brought to mind a museum built not with concrete and glass – but with a spirit of love and care – that will serve hot soup during frigid winters and destructive storms, and provide emergency care, beds, and hygiene services for the needy. As a sharing gesture, museums could lend paintings in gilded frames for the enjoyment of public housing residents. Imagine our museums hosting the homeless at night; their beds sheltered by sculptures of Egyptian gods – haven't museums already offered their spaces for over-night pajama parties? And what about the Virginia Fine Arts Museum's sold-out \$150 per night Hopper painting-turned-motel room as part of its current Hopper exhibition?

Why don't museums offer sanctuary protection for illegal immigrants, just as they offer sanctuary to inanimate objects (themselves, sometimes of doubtful provenance)? In her powerful essay, *Imagine Going on Strike: Museum Workers*, Ariella Azoulay suggests engaging asylum-seekers in interpreting museums' collections: "imagine asylum-seeking as a counter-expedition led by people in search of their object(s) and destroyed worlds." Can we not demand of our museums that a commitment to stewardship of their immediate communities be joined to their stewardship of "our" cultural history?

Museums have the financial and physical resources to instigate impactful welfare actions for the homeless, drug addicts, and illegal immigrants. They have the institutional credibility to commission new art works based on these remedies for social ills, to exhibit them, and collect them. Or, on a different scale, why not put the Head Start program under the control of *Creative Time's* artistic vision. Let's re-invent our museums and cultural institutions as sites of constituent alternatives.

Constituencies – viewers, communities, users of space – provide the building blocks for museums. They produce a museum's meaning.<sup>2</sup> Like languages that are extinct when there are no more native speakers, museums depend on their constituencies to use the museums and keep them alive. A constituent perspective will help museums to embrace their local communities, and re-focus their resources with them at the center. Constituent museum is the arch that bends the universe towards justice.

We need to keep in mind the wise observation by Azoulay that museums stand for the very logic of capitalism whose greed for new lands and markets provided the precious objects for the great collections. Thus, as the Museum moves towards a constituent model, it must simultaneously de-colonize its existing holdings, an act of reparations both real and global, symbolic and local.<sup>3</sup>

Since the beginning of the last century, artists and scholars have been devising new models for cultural institutions. Russian avant-garde artists invited workers to take control of the museums and deploy culture to build the new state. They wanted museums

to resemble community centers or “palaces of culture,” where visitors both contribute, consume, and aspire. They introduced museum apprenticeship programs to teach the new civic skills required by socialism.

John Cotton Dana, the Progressive Era thinker and radical re-imaginer of public libraries, wrote a prescient essay in 1917 titled, “The Gloom of the Museum,” where he stated: “The museums of the future in this democratic land should be adapted to the needs of the mechanic, the factory operator, the day laborer, the salesman, and the clerk, as much as to those of the professional man and the man of leisure.”

Both movements bestowed on museums their most important role: build up and energize civic responsibility and decision-making. Today, their ideas are still radical and inspiring.

*THE MUSEUM COMES HOME: A MANIFESTO* considers examples from two sympathetic, but highly contrasting projects: in one approach, individual artists form bespoke museums in the heart of their communities; in the other, cultural institutions invite their communities to participate in an open-source, self-governing museum.

**Puno Museum of Contemporary Art** by Cesar Cornejo (2007-ongoing ) uses the rooms of low-income houses in the Peruvian town of Puno for exhibitions of contemporary art, in exchange for repairs and renovations. Cornejo’s first collaborator was a taxi driver, Oscar Coila Huanca, who allowed him to repair a room in his house in exchange for hosting an exhibition of Cornejo’s drawings, made on-site. Huanca acknowledged the benefits of the exhibition in his house as an opportunity to attract tourists to Cornejo’s exhibit. <sup>4</sup> Puno is a tourist mecca for the Westerners. But for its native populations, who work in the tourist trades, the city is on the edge of economic and social collapse. The ancient economies are defunct, the younger people have left for the big cities, whilst profits from the tourist industry go to the Lima bureaucrats. Image 1 & 2.

Puno MoCA provided more than economic benefits to the community. It was also a cry for help in response to the cultural void in Peru during the 1980s and 90s.<sup>5</sup> The country was a “Latin American Albania,” bankrupted by decades of isolation, terror, and political violence. The local artists who chronicled this time sent their work abroad, or went into exile. Those who stayed were left with no cultural infrastructure. Gustavo Buntinx, the Peruvian curator and activist included the Puno MoCA project as part of the 2014 exhibition, *Micro Museum*, which showed the work of several Peruvian artists who had created bespoke museums in an effort to preserve and exhibit their own culture. <sup>6</sup> Buntinx defined this trend as “a mestizo museality” that aimed to “repair the discontinuous character of history, culture, and politics in a fractured Peruvian society.”<sup>7</sup> Museality was elaborated further by the MINOM group as a tool to combat injustice, and to foster development in communities. Buntinx’s curation, MINOM activism and Cornejo’s home-turned-to-museum ideas are examples of grass-roots infrastructure providing an alternative to state-owned art institutions. <sup>8</sup>Image 3.

Cornejo remembers this time very well. The lack of support for the arts at home restricted his creative practice to the extent that he left for Tokyo to pursue a degree in Architecture. During his studies abroad, Cornejo learned that cultural institutions can revive community health and he utilized this knowledge to create Puno MoCA. Stephen Weil has written about the ways museums provide self-affirmation.<sup>9</sup> Visitors see objects not as they are, but as a reflection of themselves. Cornejo invited art into people's homes and made works of art a part of their daily routine. He used the power of art to beautify a newly renovated abode to boost the occupants' self-respect. To emphasize that the local house is now a museum, Cornejo added a marquee and a few neon lights to its roof. We can recognize the inside joke of the typical starkly lit glass windows reminiscent of recent museum architecture, in particular the New Museum in New York City.

While using familiar tropes of museum architectural décor, Puno MoCA challenges their very foundation. Cornejo seizes its hierarchy of facilities – directors suites, board meeting rooms, gift stores, computers, toilets, storage spaces, receiving docks, and so forth – and flips this vertical hierarchy onto a horizontal plane. The living room of a taxi driver functions as all of the museum's departments combined. Within the Latin American context, where injustice and corruption are the primary materials of efficiency and profit, Puno MoCA stands out as a visionary model for community development. Image 4.

At the same time that artists are creating hyper-local cultural infrastructure, museums have also started to acknowledge they have a key role to play in re-imagining the structure of our cultural institutions. But new forms of fluid, flexible, and collaborative governance are necessary if this re-imagining is to move beyond the often superficial rhetoric of “inclusion.”

With this in mind, in 2016 a group of seven modern and contemporary art institutions in Northern and Southern Europe formed a coalition under the purview of the Council of Europe to envision a new model: a constituent museum. Moderna Galerija (Ljubljana, Slovenia); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Barcelona, Spain) were joined by a group of universities, smaller art platforms, and publishing organizations. This confederation took its name from the revolutionary anthem, "L'Internationale," and its demand for an equitable and democratic society. Image 5

The signature project of L'Internationale – *The Uses of Art - The Legacy of 1848 and 1989* – is a five-year program that commenced in 2013. The project centered itself on the milestones of 1848 – the year of widespread revolutionary upheaval in Europe – and the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. Both represent great transformations, as well as great failures: 1848 heralded the start of the Age of Capital, but also challenged the classical art promoted within the Academy. 1989 anchors an emerging globalism, major population migrations, and a trans-European civil society. The L'Internationale's website catalogs five years of diverse exhibitions focused on how the role of the arts mirrors the upheavals of political and social history. Image 6.

*The Uses of Art* resulted in 26 exhibitions, 35 conferences and seminars, and 25 publications.<sup>10</sup> Projects focusing on the concept of constituencies posed the questions: what new forms of structure and social engagement should be encouraged in order to overcome the insularity of art institutions and make them people-centered? What are our responsibilities as cultural producers (curators, arts managers, educators) dedicated to embracing our constituencies?

In 2019, two institutions – the Whitworth Galleries at The University of Manchester and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven – took on the task of answering these questions by setting up a Constituency Agency, charged with transforming both museums into Constituent Museums. The Constituency Agency will connect the museum’s resources with the constituents they are serving. The Constituent Museum will transform collecting by including digital archives of actions and relationships, and by restructuring the curatorial process into a tool for social change by bringing the needs and desires of the community into dialog with the curatorial discourse – curatorial committees with community representation have been proposed. Image 7.

Alistair Hudson, Director of the Whitworth Galleries, is known for his efforts to implement the principles of a constituent museum. Hudson cites his inspiration in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century English mechanics institutes. These institutes became the seedbed for social reorganization, democracy, and women’s rights, by providing free education for workers.<sup>11</sup> Through his exhibitions, such as *Joy For Ever: How To Use Art To Change The World And Its Price In The Market* (2017) or *Localism* (2015), he focused on the art history of Middlesbrough and how to convert museum patrons from essentially passive spectators into active participants in its curation process. He amplifies their contribution by sharing their responses during the run of the exhibition. Hudson pointed out that museums need to revisit their earlier, nineteenth-century role as active sites for self-organization and the access to cultural and economic equity.<sup>12</sup> Image 7, 8.

The Museum as a site of production of new civic identities was also the idea of the Russian Avantgarde artists. From The People's Art School, founded by Chagall in 1918 in Vitebsk to the Workers Clubs in the industrial cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow designed by Rodchenko, avant-garde artists saw the masses as the new producers and users of art. They believed in the great potential of folk colonies and art schools to help local artisans. This revolutionary model constantly inspires me on the long road to realizing the vision of the constituent museum. Today, museums need to dramatically shift course: instead of a focus on preserving dead objects, they must focus their stewardship on the lived experience of their constituencies. Let’s follow The International movement for a new Museology in its aim to make museum an instrument for development within the community and the guarantor of economic and cultural equity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museum Matter*, Smithsonian Institution press, 2002, p.35.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Wright is a Paris-based art writer and professor of the practice of theory at the European School of Visual Arts. Over the past decade, his research has examined the ongoing usological turn in art-related practice, focusing on the shift from modernist categories of autonomy to an art on the 1:1 scale, premised on usership rather than spectatorship. A selection of his writing in English may be found on the collective blog n.e.w.s. In 2013, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* was published by the Van Abbemuseum.

<sup>3</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Imagine Going on Strike: Museum Workers and Historians*, *E-flux Journal* #104 - November 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Puno, the “Folkloric capital” receives annually 10 times more tourists that its population.

<sup>5</sup> Arte Nuevo or Francisco Mariotti group made critical responses to the absence of museums in the capital.

<sup>6</sup> Jaime Higa’s, *Museum of Art in Flames*, and Emilio Hernández Saavedra’s *The Museum of Deleted Art*, along with Puno MoCa, are examples of these projects.

<sup>7</sup> In 2016, Cornejo presented an interactive installation in which he revisited the architectural elements of the Puno MoCA project. It was part of the exhibition “Vacio Museal” Curated by Gustavo Buntinx, MAC Lima, Peru.

<sup>8</sup> MINOM group is an international coalition for a new Museology, <http://www.minom-icom.net/about-us>, accessed on 12/23/19.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen E. Weil is the emeritus senior scholar in the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Museum Studies.

<sup>10</sup> One of the publication of particular note is “The Constituent Museum: Constellation of Knowledge, Politics and Mediation. A Generator of Social Change” from which this text borrows its title. Edited by John Byrne, Director of the Uses of Art Lab this book is a fantastic tool kit of projects to study and implement in our American art institutions.

<sup>11</sup> There were well over 700 Mechanics Institutes in 19th Century Britain. They were created by industrialists and philanthropists to educate the emerging industrial society in the new technologies of the age. These institutes offered a broader education in the arts and offered a place for social gatherings.

<sup>12</sup> *Joy For Ever: How To Use Art To Change The World And Its Price In The Market* 2017. The title and exhibition are both influenced by 19th Century thinker John Ruskin, whose ideas about creative freedom, craftsmanship, and architecture went on to influence politics, education, and the conservation movement.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about *The International movement for a new Museology* (MINOM) see <http://www.minom-icom.net/about-us>



Puno MoCA Installation and Performance by artists Donna Huanca and Roy Minten, Puno (2011)



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Puno MoCA Presents: Havana Museum of Contemporary Art, (2015) XII Havana Biennial Casablanca Neighborhood, Cuba.



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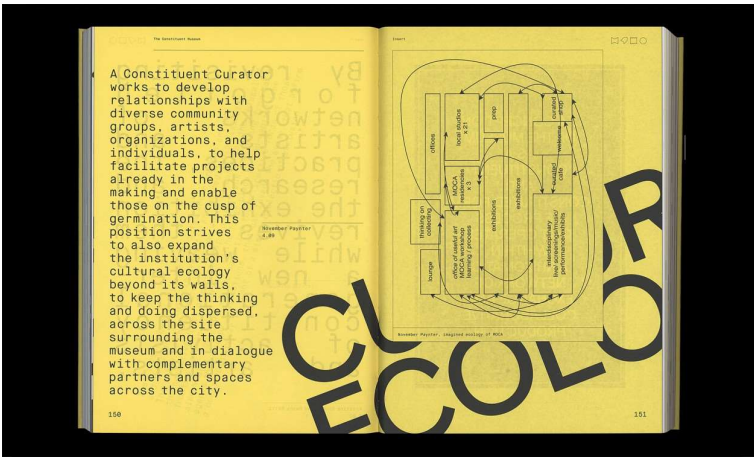


IMAGE 5



IMAGE 6



IMAGE 7



IMAGE 8

