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Pop-Up Museums: challenging the notion of the museum as a permanent institution

The phenomenon of Pop-Up museums stands as a new frontier for the conception of time and space in the process of culture enjoyment producing a relevant challenge for the museum as a permanent institution. This article analyzes the development of Pop-Up culture in response to the contemporary society and the economic trends. It also argues a possible classification of Pop-Up Museums in the actual arena, trying to underline positive and negative effects of such a trend in museum practice.

Globalization and digital devices have favored the spread of the so called Pop-Up culture, a trend widely distributed in the most diverse areas such as temporary business or cultural enterprises that materialize themselves in empty storefronts, vacant lots and such, flaunting their ephemerality¹. Commercial spaces, restaurants, theatres and libraries² become thus, a do not miss phenomena, exclusive because of their short duration, with the power to revitalize less vivid neighborhoods and attract a much wider audience.

Thanks to this low-cost nature, in response to the loosening of cultural authority and the revival of localism, the phenomenon has also infected the practices of art display in environments particularly sensitive to culture's public engagement and to its impact upon the communities, such as the USA and UK. In particular in these countries, the phenomenon of Pop-Up Museums has been in large rapidly expanding as evidenced by the TrendsWatch 2012, the annual report on new tendencies in museum practices published by the American Association of Museums³.

According to Karp and Kratz, globalization has been characterized by the compression of time and space in the everyday life with the consequence of new forms of communication enabling contact and social relations among people previously culturally and spatially separated⁴. Thus It is no coincidence that the Pop-Up culture has greater diffusion in the United States, the homeland of planned obsolescence, a globalized economic practice based on the short term life of every day products. Reflecting on the phenomenon, Latouche speaks about "disposable culture" as a result of the society of growth and consumption, committed constantly towards generating needs among the

population. This system is easily transposable to the cultural reality, where a short-term phenomenon located in alternative spaces is already an attraction in itself⁵.

The Pop-Up Museum should be considered as the effect of this revolution and analyzed exactly within the three main dimensions decreeing its particularity: the temporal, spatial, and finally the social one. Wanting to include the three aspects into a single definition, the Pop-Up Museum could be considered as a short-term institution, mobile museum or outdoor exhibit, created outside the confines of its traditional location, in existing temporary and unexpected places, with strong community anchors and the aim of enhancing civic engagement. When compared with the definition of the museum adopted by ICOM⁶ During the 21st General Conference in Vienna in 2007⁷ immediately some critical issues emerge raising questions as to whether such description must necessarily be renewed or if the Pop-Up can be qualified truly as museum. The doubts come mainly from the notion "Permanent Institution" which excludes one of the fundamental qualities of Pop-Up Museums: their timing. Yet it is precisely thanks to the fact that they come and go in unusual places provoking that surprising effect that often determines their success.

According to Harvey⁸ means of consumption have the ability to compress time and space and the effect of such manipulation generates a spectacle reaction on consumers⁹. This effect, favored by the industry consumerism of '900, has been reflected in the loss of lasting ethics and in a growing appeal on audience in arts' exceptional events, as temporary exhibitions. This is described masterfully by Haskell with reference to the exhibitions of the great masters, ancestors of the pop-up phenomenon: «The impermanence of the art exhibition induces a special excitement, epitomized by the conviction that it may be never again be possible to see something that it offers-something from very far away, or from an impenetrable private collection, or a comparison between pictures, the reassembly of a group of them. It may be one's last chance, so one goes¹⁰». Just think of the effect of expositions such as the Mona Lisa in the United States in January 1963, exhibited at the National Gallery in Washington and then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in front of a million and 700 thousand visitors¹¹ or the display of Michelangelo's *Pietà* in 1964 New York World's Fair in the Vatican Pavilion, the only time when *Pietà* by Michelangelo left San Pietro¹².

The pavilion concept together with the tradition of the Great Master's expositions in XVII century are probably the nearest predecessors of the Pop-Up museum. The word pavilion derives from the latin 'papilio', meaning tent, or more literally butterfly, hinting its flexibility in terms of space time and function with military origins. Despite the pavilion flourished during the great word fairs of the last 1600, in the Alexander Romance Life of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) there is men-

tion of a mobile stone pavilion in which the Ethiopian queen was travelling to the fields of her armies. While the interest in pavilions took off during the era of world explorations and colonialism¹³, the temporary exhibition finds its origins in Rome in the ceremonial expositions of the '600 and later in the great masters' exhibitions of the '70s of the XVIII century, considered as the first exhibitions intentionally and consciously time bound¹⁴. But if the Roman exhibitions were aimed to enhance the nobility, it was with the regular organization of exhibitions in Florence by the Academy of Design from 1676 to 1770, that the attention of curators and the purpose of the shows keep on moving towards the public, making available paintings hardly visible accompanied by a catalogue and a guide¹⁵. The first real exhibition of old masters took place in 1813 in the halls of the British Institution in Pall Mall with an exposition dedicated to Joshua Reynolds. Considered as the prototype of the current exhibitions of ancient art, it gave rise to the debate about the negative impact that celebrating the great artists of the past might have on contemporary artists¹⁶. With the raise of temporary art expositions three crucial aims were therefore consolidating, one interested in the construction of a collective sense centered around the shared revolutionary past (the aim of the great national museums) defined by Schittich as 'representative', one focus on the knowledge transfer in order to demonstrate the public benefit of art and knowledge (the aim of the so called 'museums of the humans') defined as 'enlightening' and the last one linked to the entertainment function of expositions, defined as 'sensational'¹⁷.

Thus, the spread of Pop Up museum considered as flexible formats in places not usually associated with art exhibitions, generate a mix of all these historical contradictory factors and should therefore be included among the reactions to a static museum concept where the low level of engagement with objects prevails and the falling number of repeated visitors is an ongoing phenomenon¹⁸.

In Pop-Up Museums the direction of the meeting is flipped by going toward the viewer rather than wait for his visit, and the result of the appearance of such "cultural catalysts" can contribute actively to the economic and cultural revitalization of the community. In all these terms it's possible to say that Pop-Up's question the stale idea of culture towards a renewal.

A kind of official step towards this new conception might be found in the "*Manifesto for the (r)Evolution of Museum Exhibitions*" by Kathleen McLean presented during the ASTC conference in 2009¹⁹. In her statement she promotes simple and flexible formats for exhibitions that put primacy on ideas and visitor contribution. Four points are strictly connected with the Pop-Up Museum idea: the opportunity given to the visitors to design their own exhibitions (9: "Wiki-exhibitions"), the preference to work in small contexts (10. Work smaller), the necessity to

invest less money and time (11. Do it quicker and cheaper) and the possibility to cross boundaries between arts (13. Mix things up). Concerning this last point the discourse on Pop-Up Museums fits perfectly into the trend of contamination between the arts as an expanding practice within expositions, where the line between fashion, performing arts and visual arts becomes increasingly blurred.

This can be inferred from a possible classification of the different types of Pop-Up Museums, difficult to realize due to a frequent inappropriate use of the term. Dealing with such kind of new tendency, not clearly defined and often confused with for instance the simple delocalization of museums, a first big split into two main categories should be done: a first group that I will call "Institution based" Pop-Up, where the short term exhibition has a strong anchorage with the Institution promoting and enhancing it; and a second set that can be defined as "Show-it-your-self expositions" including exhibitions composed of objects owned by the individual artists or citizens who decide on their own volition to expose them.

Among the "Institution based" it is possible to recognize two main trends, one more interested in the effect of such cultural events upon the citizens and neighborhood that I will address as "Community focused" and the other one connected to the marketing strategies of existing brands and museums, the so called "Brand events by moving institutions". To understand the impact on the communities of the first subcategory is relevant to analyze the example of Mobile M+ in Hong Kong, a series of "nomadic" exhibitions in West Kowloon Cultural District serving as a pre-opening for the M+ Museum as such.

The project has become an occasion to explore different possibilities of engaging the public without the presence of a building as explained in the statement for the exhibition "Mobile M+: Yau Ma Tei". According to it, the conception of this non-institutional museum is considered as a way of turning the supposed disadvantage of being "rootless" into an advantage because of the possibility to realize projects that would not have been possible in a single museum building²⁰.

Another representative example of institution based museum in a smaller scale is the Stretch Pop-Up Museum launched for two weeks in an empty unit of a busy shopping mall in east Leeds in 2009²¹. The project was established by a charity in partnership with the Leeds Museum. Since the exhibits were hands-on, the aim was to organize activities able to engage the public with the collections, with an important result in terms of citizenships involved, more than 5.000 visits.

Parallel to this priority given to the effect on the community, there is the interest towards advertising for and through art expositions. This is the case of famous fashion brands creating temporary museums, often mixing up dress exhibitions with contemporary art works, in order to assert their public image in the market,

such as Prada did with its 24h Pop-Up Museum in Paris in January 2012 (exposing also works by the artist Francesco Vezzoli) and Gucci Pop-Up Museum in Singapore in April 2013. But belonging to the category “Brand events by moving institutions” should be considered also the movement of well-known museums in other countries in order to establish their brand. Representative of this topic is the Pompidou, which will respond to the death of landmark art institutions abroad not by building spectacular buildings as the Guggenheim²² did, but by creating a network of temporary exhibitions in museums, universities and shopping malls in Bric²³’s countries with growing economies and art scenes. As stated by the President Alain Seban during an interview on May 2012, the aim is strongly linked to the actual topic of branding culture: «This is a strategy for expanding internationally into territories that can aim to create their own contemporary art brands. Countries such as China, India and Brazil, for instance, can develop such brands in the future²⁴.»

Moving to the second macro area, “Show-it yourself expositions”, it is useful to distinguish between the art and the conversation focused. The first group develops when an artist, or better a group of them, find a place where to expose their works for a period²⁵. This creates an effect of mutual exchange between artists and the host community, as the citizens themselves allow the local artists to showcase their work in their own properties with the final effect of supporting the neighborhood by both sides in a *win-win* relationship for artist and the local people²⁶. These kinds of Pop-Ups are a practical response to the new art world, where there is always less space for beginners to find a space in institutions, also by giving artists a kind of curatorial control that standard gallery shows don’t allow²⁷.

With “Conversation focused” I refer Michelle de Carlo’s conception of the Pop-Up Museum defined as a «theme based event where people share personal objects and stories in order to have conversations with other participants²⁸.» She hypothesizes about two hour lasting museums located in small and humble places where people can bring their own objects and write their own labels. The goal of this kind of Pop-Up is promoting conversations and focus on intimate experiences lived by participants. Thus everyone is sharing something and the attention is put on the uniqueness of each object and its related sentimental value. All this analysis leads to a measuring of the effects of the Pop-Up culture in the field of museums. Such aspects are well represented on the web, by blogs and social networks that allow the comments of the people on the topic. An analysis of the opinions of experts, critics, promoters and individuals can help in balancing the positive and the negative effects of the spread of Pop-Ups as a new way of conceiving the museum for the public. Among the positives must be said that the now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t as-

pect of pop-ups makes the experience stronger, less intimidating and more interactive supporting a new way of conceiving the place of culture by involving the viewer on a non-institutional plane. Furthermore their constant nomadism facilitates the possibility to introduce museums to new audiences making museum buildings seem less imposing. For the institutions it represents also a low-cost, low-risk way to experiment with permanent locations for new museums as happened with M+, or satellite locations for established museums, for instance the Pompidou. Thus, according to the American association of Museums, they could be also a strategy for sustainability considered as a practical solution to the problem of arts funding²⁹.

But there are also some negative critics testified exhaustively from the position of the journalist Neil Genzlinger in an article published on August 12th 2011 on New York Times with the emblematic title *"Invasion of the Pop-Ups: Time for a Smack-down"*³⁰. In his publication he argues that tourists have enough trouble in finding the most visible and permanent attractions, and referring to the Pop-Up culture in general he talks about an infestation. The consequence is an annoyance factor such as the trend of the flash-mob, defined by him as a cultural trash bin.

Then he shifts the criticism on a sociological level considering the presence of Pop-Ups as an increasing factor for the impermanence in our lives, adding that: «This phenomenon has lost any guerrilla chic it might once have had. it's out of control. My objection is to the term itself and its sudden ubiquity, a shameless bandwagon-jumper³¹. »

To conclude after weighing the positive and negative effects, it is possible to argue that the phenomenon of Pop-Up Museums represents a temporal and spatial revolution in the conception of exhibitions, a factor that raises the question of whether the future of the collections will remain inside the walls or the institutions themselves will move both collections and their communities of supporters onto moving platforms. Thus Pop-up museums represent also an important tool for contemporary exhibitions raising many issues on the debate between form and content. Pop Ups demonstrate that the purpose of expositions nowadays is no more aimed directly to illustrate a subject by presenting a collection of objects, but sometimes the objects are even useless in order to communicate that subject. As happens in the case of installations buildings created specifically for a particular event, or in the case of unusual places of contemporary nature, they both represent objects of interest in their selves opening up many interesting possibilities also from an architectural/design point of view³², allowing a more experimental and cheaper work on the space. The marketing ideology that controls our society, weary of consumption, has put the emphasis on the entertainment goal of exhibitions, especially if they are extraordinary and produce surprise and admiration between the audience. Thus the deep sense community carried out by certain types of pop-ups could

represent the compromise between the event effect and the rooted purpose of knowledge transfer, traditionally supported by the stable institutions.

Taking in to account the possible classification theorized in this study, an interesting extension of this research could well be the qualitative analysis of the impact of such initiatives on the community. Furthermore, a more in depth study involving the Institutions should be addressed in order to understand the economical impact towards sustainability and the possibility to extend the practice in new cultural environments.

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 - 16 In 1815 the British Institution opened the exhibition dedicated to Rubens, Rembrandt, Van Dyck and other artists of the Flemish and Dutch schools. In that occasion Sir George Beaumont, future founder of the National Gallery, wrote an anonymous pamphlet against this and other exhibitions of old masters, he thought damage the contemporary artists. The British Institution was also strongly opposed by the Royal Academy, who considered this action detrimental to the interests of national art (ibid.)
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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5