

Critical reflection on topic
The instrumentalization of culture

Jana Stejskalová

MEACMC / Conceitos de Museologia Contemporânea

Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade do Porto

Academic year 2015 / 2016

Introduction

In this seminar work, I would like to focus on the theme of the need for financial support to cultural institutions, the possibility of involvement of museums and galleries in social and urban regeneration of deprived places and abandoned areas without previous meaningful purpose. Furthermore I would like to relate all of these issues to the context of cultural situation in Czech republic. In the beginning, I will shortly introduce general overview and historical background, it also serves as an introduction to the situation and further reflection on important issues concerning culture in there. My focus on the situation in the Czech Republic is based on the fact that I know it best, but probably these issues are generally valid and applicable also to another countries. Later I will deal with the idea of developing a system to measure museum's and galleries' performances, the necessity of involvement in social and urban revitalization, also the question of financial support by local governments

A brief overview of recent art history of the Czech republic

There was a huge gap to overpass after the democratic revolution in 1989. It was a total turnover for entire society and in it's consequences for entire Europe. The usual tendency for east European art is to divide in Pre- and Post- 1989. However, not everything can change in instant and some of the previous era aspects live on. In arts, the communist legacy represents mainly the idea of underground culture. As very most of the independent live culture was being prohibited for more than 40 years (only government approved visual artists were allowed to make exhibition, the same applied for music, literature and anything else), there was a strong underground culture movement. That involved illegal gatherings, festivals, apartment exhibitions or land art actions, performances. Independent art groups have been established.

The results of being cut of mainstream media resulted in poor engagement of independent arts with general public. That resulted in bad taste and very low interest in art, generally. Interestingly, at the same rate as culture, communist government managed to decrease interest in religion as well, making Czech republic one of the least religious country in the world¹. While, before the WWII, country was at similar levels as the rest of western Europe. At the same time, there was little to none connection and communication exchange with western European culture, which allowed for establishing so to say “endemic” art genders and unprecedented variations and platforms without

1 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/7-charts-that-reveal-religions-role-around-the-world-10170978.html> along with China or Sweden.

influence of either art market and globalisation (or urge to follow or copy trends).

After the revolution in 1989, all of the specifics mentioned above brought huge issues for international integration of Czech art. There was a strong interest of west European galleries and curators in post-soviet countries. But, for multiple reasons, there only was a little of successful results and cooperation. Obviously, there was a strong language barrier, that resulted in lack of confidence at the both sides. Then there was a problem of classification of the eastern art, as it completely differed and stood out of usual western categories (such as Pop art, Op Art, Minimal etc). And then, finally, there were no trading rules and art market “management” as well as no real overview, compendium of artists and art group.

Later on, hundreds of commercial art galleries emerged, but with no quality assurance², they quickly started selling pure kitsches (also, numerous artists bended to the commercial aspect). At the same time, art market was further undermined by poor government laws and general lack of attention, that allowed for massive forgery (especially of painters of first half of 20th century)³. All that led to very little credibility of art market and very low willingness of art collectors to invest. Specific role was also done by the Czech National Gallery, that has, under direction of Milan Knížák⁴, done numerous questionable acquisitions and generally cared very little about the conditions of art trading. Neither it supported the youngest, post revolution generation. Furthermore, because of the low budgets, neither any other state run museums could be making enough acquisitions, resulting of major lack of support for both young and established artists.

Thanks to the legacy of communist era, there is a strong tradition of do-it-yourself approach. This reflects both everyday life of Czech people⁵ and equally in arts. Around year 2000, there was a wave of new of small, independent art venues all around the country, in vast majority run by artists, fresh degree holders from re-established art faculties, that had no other options to freely display their works and to ensure their context.

Measuring museum's value

In reaction to this situation, the need to develop some kind of system of the asses

2 There was not enough university educated people, this problem was painful in all fields, but in visual art, it extremely well exemplified.

3 <http://www.culturenet.cz/aktuality/george-novotny-cesky-trh-s-umenim-sakali-leta-podvodu-a-padelku/n:4073/>

4 Paradoxially, he was a part of Fluxus movement in 70's

5 The obvious joke goes to Czech summer gardening <http://www.dumazahrada.cz/stavba-rekonstrukce/stavba/2012/6/5/nas-jedinecny-fenomen-chalupareni-chatareni/>

measurement to present an overview of “successful” cultural events arose. Many thoughts to this issue presented and published also Carrol Scott. In one of her texts *Measuring social value* – she deals with this need to distinguish “valuable“ cultural projects and activities. In 2010 she established *Carol Scott Associates* and she focuses primarily on the measuring performance impact of museums and providing long-term social value of participation in the community. „At a national level, the sector as a whole is challenged to find a narrative to demonstrates that museums create value that makes a difference in the public domain.“⁶ The idea of measuring values that museums bring are very much welcomed, especially by the government, city councillors and other “politicians” who divide the money and thanks to this system it's much easier to do so. The change of funding had great impact on museums, mainly because of the necessity to diversify the funding base by the combination of admission charges and increased external sponsorship⁷. The similar development happened also with many galleries in the Czech Republic after the revolution in 1989. Because there is no sophisticated system for funding and money earmarked for culture are on the contrary every year getting smaller, the situation for maintaining even large, well-known institutions is very difficult.

So, what is the secret of a successful cultural institution?

„Indicators of successful museum performance arising from this model are predominantly quantifiable and include items such as the number of visitors to the museum, the numbers of users of facilities such as websites, the number of new exhibitions presented and travelled, the number of publications produced, educational programmes offered, objects conserved and registered, etc.“⁸

Of course the system is more complicated and we can assume that it involves over time, it is also very important to specify if we measure short time or long time value etc. But I also see this system of measurement as very controversial, because the evaluation procedures are originally developed to measure economical success of business corporates, as Carol Scott suggests herself: „(...) the introduction of performance measurement has generated considerable discussion and debate. In general terms, critics have questioned the appropriateness of applying a system to the public sector that was originally based in the commercial sector (...)“⁹ She is aware of the limits of the system, but she believes it's asset overcomes it's possible imperfections.

6 Retrieved January 22, 2016, from <https://www.bu.edu/prc/prcpov/artists/a05.html><http://blog.ashgate.com/2015/04/22/evidencing-change-how-do-we-measure-social-value/>

7 Scott, C. (2002). "Measuring social value" in: Sandell, R. (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*. New York: Routledge. p. 42

8 Ibid. p. 42

9 Ibid. p. 43

Me personally, I believe the system of measuring performance in museums and its value and assess to community is quite irrelevant. How can we really measure the visitor's feelings when they are visiting museum? How can we measure the good taste people may develop thanks to museums and art generally? And also I don't think that this system is any helpful when dividing money, because if we measure for example the number of visitors attending cultural event, we will always find more people interested in musicals and other "popular" events, but does that mean they are more important than museum of current art?

This issue is very much alive since the beginning of 20th century, when German theoretician Theodor Adorno used the term "culture industry"¹⁰. He believed that if art wants to be significant to the masses, it must be transformed from creation to production. Today, we know that it's not that simple, we can't just say that all "products" of cultural industry are bad, but we consider them more individually. However, his primary thought is still current, the mainstream culture turned to easy understandable and accessible entertainment, that we can especially today call cultural industry products. With this topic deals also one of the Czech authors Martin Cikánek in his publication *Kreativní průmysly – příležitost pro novou ekonomiku*¹¹ where he describes the relationship between market sectors, creative industries and non-commercial art supported from public budgets. The conclusion is that creative industries and creative economy should definitely be considered relevant for the future direction of our country.

Museum as a tool for social and urban regeneration

On the other hand the idea of museum as an instrument for activation and revitalization both social and local surroundings is very current. This topic is also dealt with by Jocelyn Dodd's and Richard Sandell's publication *Including museums: perspectives on museums, galleries and social inclusion*. They speak both about the cooperation with social groups and about urban regeneration. I would like to focus on the urban regeneration further, because I believe it's very important issue also in Czech republic.

In my opinion, museums have ability to bring up to an unpleasant environment new potential to improve the overall situation: "Museums and galleries of all kinds have both the

10 This term was presented as critical vocabulary in the chapter "*The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*", of the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944)

11 Approximate translation: Creative Industries - an opportunity for the new economy

potential to contribute towards the combating of social inequality and a responsibility to do so.”¹² Especially in Czech republic this aspect is very important because during the communist era there were many funds pointed to the marginal areas, not only to the cities near state borders, but also cities without their own manufacturing industry. There were plans to employ as many citizens as possible, so it wasn't that important whether a given production at that site is suitable or not. It means that when the regime fell and money stopped to flow into these peripheral areas many factories were forced to reduce or even stop their production. As a result, we have today many large building complexes, often even in the middle of the city, decaying and without any useful usage.

And there comes the possibility for using the space for cultural revival. „Museums, archives and libraries do have a role to play in neighbourhood renewal and urban regeneration but that this is not something which they can do on their own.”¹³ Recently many former factories were turned into gallery space while maintaining the original industrial appearance with typical site-specific focus not only into the art but also events aimed to arouse people's interest into the area and culture.

As an example we can name Armaturka gallery in Ústi nad Labem (picture number 1), northern city with large problematic Romany community, Plato Ostrava gallery (picture number 2) on the very east part of the Czech republic with huge smog issues due to production and also because main part of the city is formed by factories and production buildings and last one, recently very successful gallery Papírna Plzeň (picture number 3), which used to be factory for manufacturing paper, it is also situated in the middle of the city and for many years there was no use for this large complex. The Papírna Plzeň gallery is also interesting for the fact that last year (in 2015) Pilsen was awarded the status of *European Capital city of Culture*. It brought a lot of money with it, many new visitors, tourists, different cultural projects and whole city was very alive for the entire year, but I doubt a bit about it's sustainability in the coming years. Anyway, all these spaces have in common that thanks to the financial and political support they were turned from abandoned and disregarded place into the living spaces with many cultural events, not only galleries and exhibitions, but also concerts, theatres, workshops or even bars and cafés. These venues are irreplaceable pieces in the puzzle of revitalizing post-industrial cities.

12 Sandell, R. (2002), "*Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance*" in: Sandell, R. (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*. New York: Routledge. p. 1

13 Dodd, J. and Sandell, R. (2001). *Including museums*. Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester. p. 50

The possibilities to help with social level and quality of local neighbourhood are many. Although I don't agree with the statement that every gallery needs to involve and use its power and resources to engage with these issues, I believe that it's very profitable for both sides if they do so. „Museums' and galleries' involvement in Neighbourhood renewal is not about becoming social workers but it is about using collections and resources to support social agendas for the public good.”¹⁴ Exactly as the statement says, museums shouldn't supply the social service but I believe that every museum should use their collections and activities to point out the main local issues and try to improve their neighbourhood even by „doing their job“. “(...) it is through the thoughtful representation of difference and diversity that all museums, regardless of the nature of their collections, the resources available to them, their mission and the context within which they operate, can contribute towards greater social equity.”¹⁵ But despite what the quotation says, funds are undoubtedly necessary, because in these days it is common practice that the governments systematically under finance the culture sector generally. There is another very interesting publication about this issue by Lambert Zuidervaart *Art in Public: Politics, Economics, and a Democratic Culture* from 2011, where he basically stated reasons why should governments provide funding for the arts and culture even if it seemingly doesn't contribute to daily life. But as he argues, the arts contribute to democratic communication and a social economy, fostering the critical and creative dialogue that a democratic society needs.

Conclusion

The aim of this seminar work was to shed some light on the influence and importance of museums and galleries in city-scapes and local communities. Focusing on current situation in Czech republic, we have gone through the different important topics. Such as the idea of measuring museum's value as a tool to help governments divide money into different directions, to obligation for museums to involve in social and urban revitalization. And finally we touched the statement that although culture changed from creation to production the importance to finance both popular and “high culture“ remains.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 51

¹⁵ Sandell, R. (2002), "Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance in: Sandell, R. (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*. New York: Routledge. p. 4

Bibliography

Adorno, T. (1944). "*The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*", of the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Cikánek, M. (2009). "*Kreativní průmysly - příležitost pro novou ekonomiku*" 1. vyd. V Praze: Institut umění

Dodd, J. and Sandell, R. (2001). *Including museums*. Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester.

Findlen, P. (1989). "*The museum: its classical etymology and renaissance genealogy*". *Journal of the History of Collections*, 1(1), pp.59-78.

Sandell, R. (2002), "*Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance*" in: Sandell, R. (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

Scott, C. (2002). "Measuring social value" in: Sandell, R. (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

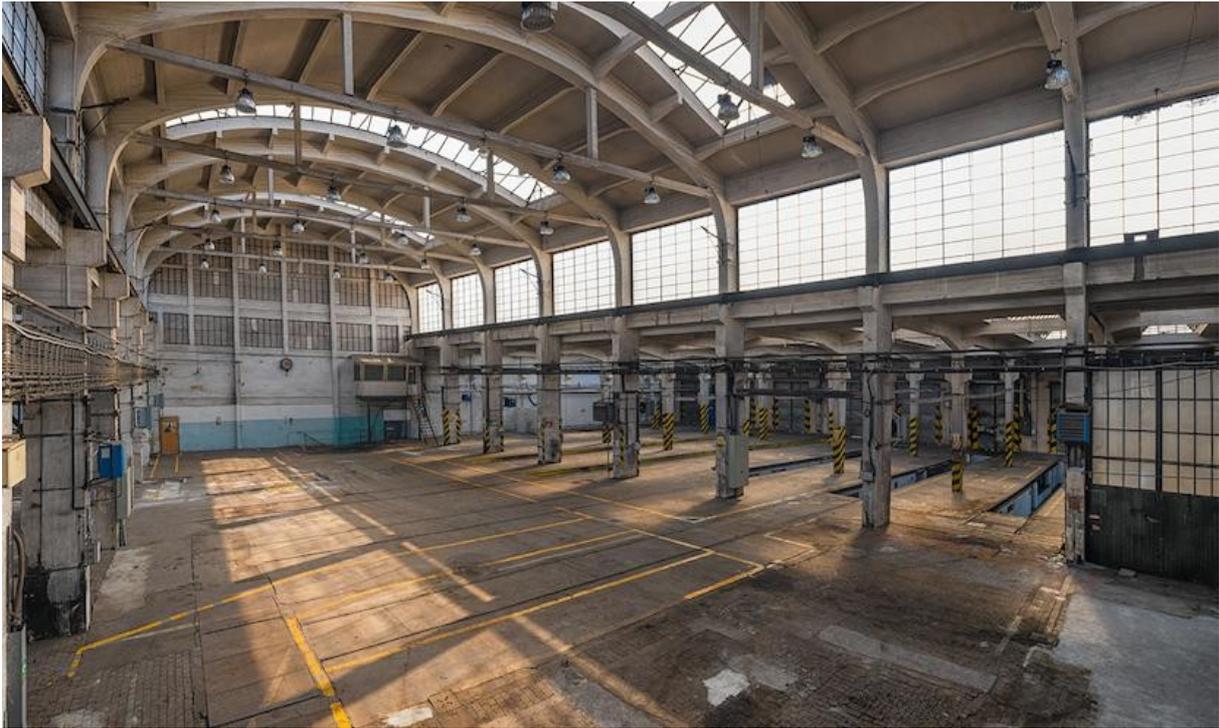
Zuidervaart, L. (2011). *Art in public*. New York: Cambridge University Press.



Picture number 1: Armaturka Gallery, Usti nad Labem



Picture number 2: Plato Ostrava



Picture number3: Papírna Plzeň