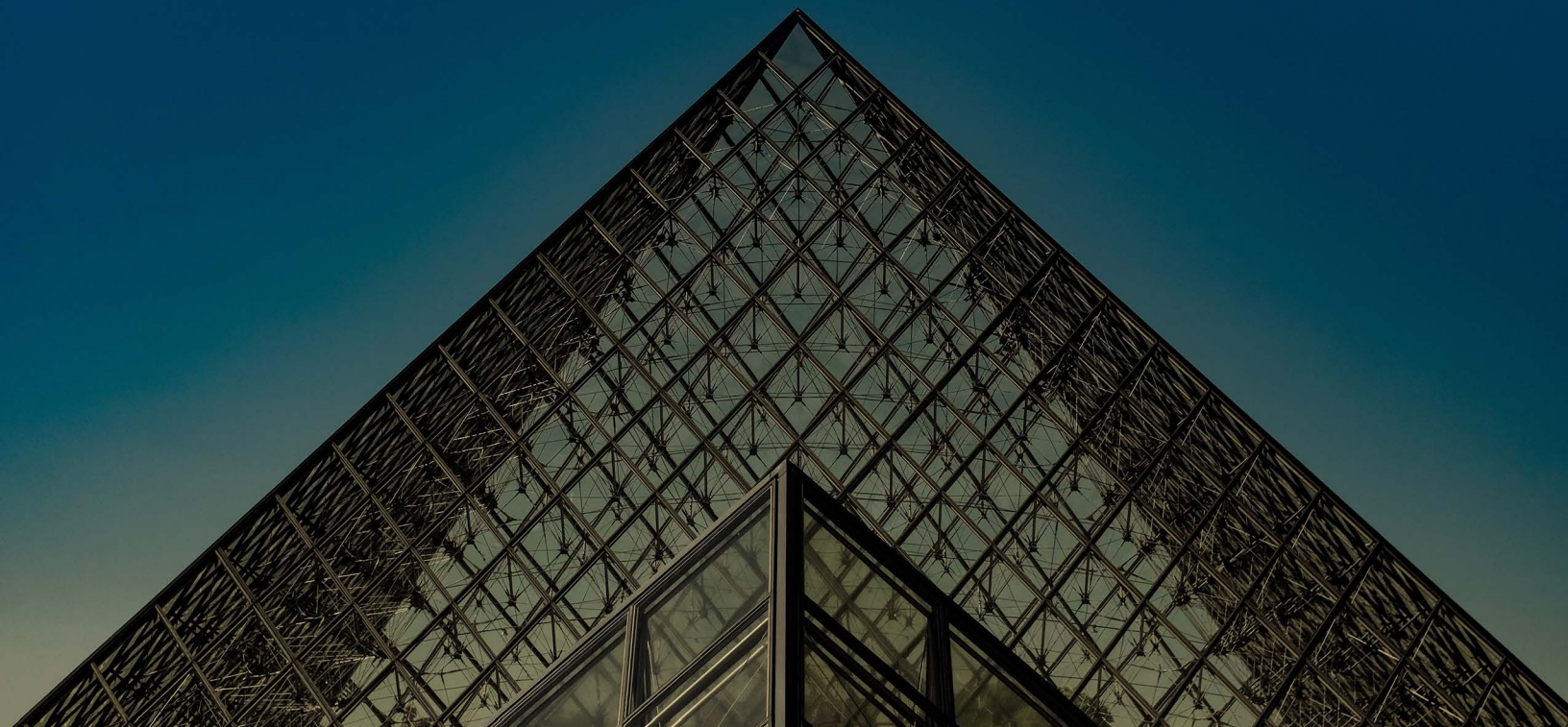




the museum review

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 1 2020

WWW.THEMUSEUMREVIEW.ORG
ISSN 2574-0296



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The Museum Review

www.TheMuseumReview.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave., Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.RogersPublishing.org

Cover photo: Louvre Museum, Unicorn Cloud.
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Curating the contemporary at University Museums

PATRIZIA LUZI, PHD

Keywords University museums; contemporary curating; academic knowledge; critical thinking; collaborative practice

Abstract Originating as encyclopedic and universal museums in the 18th century, university museums house extremely varied collections, referring to a number of diverse academic disciplines. These collections played a significant role in developing a type of knowledge founded on taxonomy and empirical observation, and during the 20th century the collections progressively lost their original academic and epistemological function. Today, university museums are typically curated using traditional curatorial approaches focusing either on the didactic or on the aesthetic or evocative potentiality of their collections. This paper calls attention to select alternative curatorial approaches founded on collaborative and interdisciplinary works that have been developing “to curate the contemporary,” and to discuss how these approaches can be used in curating university museums.

About the Author Patrizia Luzi studied History of Art at the Courtauld Institute in London, and at the University of Florence where she achieved a Master in Historical and Cultural Heritage Studies degree, discussing a thesis in museology that focuses on the display of Islamic Art in the 21st century. She has a PhD in Philosophical Anthropology and Fundamentals of Science. Patrizia worked as an independent researcher on the philosophy of physics and on the philosophy of Kant, Husserl and Heidegger, and she published two books related to these topics. Her current interest focuses on curatorial approaches to modern and contemporary art, and on the epistemological functions of museums in order to shape interdisciplinary scholarship and transcultural knowledge.

This article was published on September 21, 2020 at www.themuseumreview.org

University museums and collections

The idea of this paper arose while I was visiting an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London. It was a survey exhibition of the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia entitled *The museum of emotion*.¹ Walking around the exhibition, I had the impression that I was in a university museum. I had recently visited Oxford University’s Pitt Rivers Museum, and the strong iconographical analogies between Kader Attia’s *The museum of emotion* and the Pitt Rivers Museum, which houses similar types of objects and displays, came to mind (figure 1). This article is a response to those aesthetic experiences.

University museums originated as encyclopedic and universal museums in the 18th century, and their collections included a broad diversity of objects, from etchings to insects, paintings to anatomical waxes, taxidermied animals, ritual masks, and scientific instruments. Among the oldest and most prestigious university museums are the University of Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum (opened in 1683), Harvard University’s Philosophy Chamber (founded in 1766), and the University of Göttingen’s Academic Museum (opened in 1773).

In the 19th century, at a time when it was thought that only a deep understanding of a single scientific discipline could reveal new insight, universities divided their collections according to the emergent academic disciplines. Housed in different locations and used by professors and academics to teach and to conduct research, these disciplinary collections played a significant role in the development of a kind of knowledge based on taxonomy and empirical observation. This knowledge is described

by Foucault as “a general science of order,” characterizing the episteme of Western culture in the modern age.²



Figure 1. Kader Attia, *The Museum of Emotion*, Hayward Gallery, London, 2019; The Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford.

During the 20th century as the “epistemological paradigm in Western thinking shifted from empirical observation and categorization practiced by museums, to experimentation and abstraction prized by universities,”³ university museums progressively lost their original academic and epistemological function. Many were much neglected, and in some cases dismissed. Only in recent decades have these collections again attracted the attention of universities, which in part consider their museums as a means to teach students, to engage with the public, and to elevate their public image.

The antecedents of university museums can be found in the cabinets of natural history of the late Renaissance, including those of Ulisse Aldovrandi in Bologna and Ferrante Imperato in Naples (figure 2). Aiming to promote the knowledge of the natural world, these cabinets encompassed a significant numbers of items – *artificialia* and mainly *naturalia* (animal, plant and mineral) – displayed along the walls, the ceiling, and in some cases on the floor, too, according to a complex web of resemblances and similitudes. They were the expression of a so-called “pansemiotic world view.” This is defined as “the idea that every object, whether natural or artificial is connected to the other and signifies one or several other objects (which can in turn be abstract qualities, virtues, or particular states of affairs or events).”⁴



Figure 2. Ferrante Imperato's Museum in Naples. Engraving from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale*, Naples 1599.

Today, university museums remain disciplinary and specialized, and are hosted in diverse settings. University museum collections, having lost their original epistemological functions, are mainly used as didactic tools for undergraduate students. As Ivan Gaskell noted, “the generation of knowledge occurs not in university museums but elsewhere in the university and (...) university museums are no more than conduits for transmitting that knowledge.”⁵ Curatorial approaches used to curate university museums have been focused either on the didactic or on the aesthetic or evocative potential of the collections.

The most popular and successful curatorial approach in university museums is the didactic one, where the curator is both the specialist – the *connoisseur* – of the collection, and a mediator or facilitator of experience that makes the collection accessible to the public. The efforts of many university museum curators focus on increasingly sophisticated and engaging pedagogical approaches in order to attract a wider public and to make the collections interesting not only for undergraduate students, but also for children and adults. These approaches are founded upon communication and interpretation, which have polarized the attention of university museum curators and their financial budgets. A magnificent result of these efforts is the Orientation Gallery *Exploring the Past* at the Ashmolean Museum⁶ which works as a living encyclopedia, able to engage and to fascinate a wide range of visitors from diverse backgrounds.

Another curatorial approach in university museums focused on the aesthetic of the collection itself. For example, this model was used to interpret the ethnographic collection at the *Musée du quai Branly* in Paris, where the exhibition design (the display and particularly the light) play an important role in creating aesthetic value. An impressive example of this kind of approach is the display of the Intermediateque museum at the University of Tokyo (figure 3).



Figure 3. *Studiolo*, Intermediatheque, University of Tokyo.

“With their exhibition at the Intermediatheque, these salvaged scientific specimens now regain not only their value as educational materials, but first and foremost [regain] their charm as historical objects.”⁷ Other museums – like the Pitt Rivers at Oxford and the Teylers Museum in Haarlem, The Netherlands (founded 1778) – have purposely “preserv[ed] the very distinctive period feel of the ‘old’ museum,”⁸ deliberately choosing to be “timeless” and to be a “museum of the museum.”

Curating the contemporary

This paper calls attention to some alternative curatorial practice that has been developing “to curate the contemporary,” and it discusses how these practices could be used to curate university museum collections. *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012) and *Talking Contemporary Curating* (2015) are two books written and edited by art historian Terry Smith where discourse about “curate the contemporary” has been taking shape through discussion among people of different professional and academic backgrounds. These individuals include curators, specifically independent curators of contemporary art, but also art historians, art critics, philosophers, and museum directors.

To unfold this discourse I will focus on four key points that I find particular relevant in relation to university museum collections. The first point is that *curating the contemporary* does not necessary mean to curate contemporary art. The latter can be a tool suitable to curate the contemporary, but it is not exclusive in this respect. To curate the contemporary means to curate something that is *cum-tempore* (meaning: with the time), that has to do with our way to be in the time in which we live. It also addresses the way in which we relate with the past and imagine the future. To curate the contemporary means to curate something that matters to us, because this has to do with our very

being in the world. The contemporary is an existential condition, rather than a chronological concept that can be defined through periodization. It is a condition that, according to curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, requires to be out of step with the present in order to be fully perceived.⁹ Art historian Claire Bishop suggests to understand it as “an operation:”

At the moment, “the contemporary” as a category in both the academy and the museum tends to be understood as presentism: the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking. Instead, I want to propose the contemporary as an operation, a way of acting on the past that is informed by a set of political desires for the future...I want to emphasize that this action is a fundamentally curatorial gesture.¹⁰

University museum collections can be used to curate the contemporary because they are collections about knowledge and, specifically, about a kind of knowledge – the academic and institutional one – that is intrinsically connected with power. University museum collections offer the unique possibility to undertake research about epistemological paradigms involved in producing academic knowledge and about the role these paradigms have in shaping political, religious, and cultural ideology such as colonialism, imperialism, and orientalism. The function of academic knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and power are discourses that matter in order to understand our contemporaneity, and to relate with our past as well as our future.

It is probably not a coincidence that many contemporary artists – such as Kader Attia, Mark Dion (figure 4), and Damian Hirst – have made installations and works of art that explicitly refer to objects that can be found in university museum collections. A controversial work of contemporary art, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* of Damian Hirst (figure 5), is the type of object that could have been conceived and made for a university museum collection in the 19th century.



Figure 4. Mark Dion, *Gucken und staunen*. Installation for the exhibition *Weltwissen*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2010-2011.



Figure 5. Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.

The second point is that to curate the contemporary means to think in terms of interconnections, blurring the boundaries between disciplines, and breaking with the formal divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art that was taken for granted during much of the 20th century. This idea is very well expressed by Maria Lindt, a Swedish curator of contemporary art, who said:

*I [understand] curating as a way of thinking in terms of interconnection: linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, history and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns and tensions.*¹¹

‘Connectivity’ and ‘inclusiveness’ are two relevant features that characterize the contemporary and describe its difference with modernity, which had been defined as a time of specialization and exclusiveness. Moreover, the contemporary has been described as a time of layered and multiple temporality, of synchronic rather than diachronic timelines. According to some scholars, to understand the contemporary is essentially a curatorial operation, involving curatorial thinking and curatorial practice.¹²

An interesting example of an interdisciplinary curatorial approach is *Laboratorium*, an exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Vanderlinden in Antwerp in 1999 that brought together works of artists and scientists, looking at what unites them, and wherein the public was invited to tour scientific laboratories around Antwerp (figure 6). The exhibition attempted “to create a bridge between the specialized vocabularies of science and art and the general audience, between the expertise of skilled practitioners and the concerns and preconception of the interested public.”¹³

Another significant example of this way to understand curating is *What if*, curated by Maria Lindt at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 2000. The exhibition explored the connection between art practice, design and architecture, involving thirty artists including Liam Gillick who organized – or in Lind’s terminology “filtered” – the layout of the space.



Figure 6. *Laboratorium*, Provinciaal Museum voor Fotografie, Antwerp 1999.

Due to being extremely varied collections that span different time periods, cultures, and disciplines –transhistorical, transdisciplinary and transcultural collections – university museum collections allow for connections to be made and ideas to be followed through time and across cultures in a number of very different and interesting ways. The things mentioned by Maria Lindt – objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories and discourse - are found in the installations of contemporary artists and are exactly the kind of things that can and should be linked together within university museum collections. Further, as historical development of the collections of natural history of the late Renaissance, university museum collections also have a holistic or pansemiotic valence that has been lost during the process of specialization in the 19th century, and that should be reactivated, undertaking curatorial approaches that focus on holistic interpretation of these collections.

The third point I want to outline is that curating the contemporary means to think critically and to be committed to critical thinking. A way to understand the specific critical valence of contemporary curatorial practice was expressed by Okwui Enwezor who spoke about “creating a space of vulnerability.”¹⁴ A space where – as noted – “intimacy, accessibility and self-disclosure are welcomed, and the audience are encouraged to express their ideas and feeling by participating in the collective production of meaning.”¹⁵ This method to understand curatorial practice has characterized the work of curators like Okwui Enwezor and Koyo Kouoh. They have been engaged with the “post-colonial constellation,” working with non-Western artists whose work deals with topics

connected with colonialism, identity marginalization, and emigrations. Okwui Enwezor was the artistic director of *Documenta 11* in 2002, that was the first global postcolonial exhibitions (figure 7).¹⁶ Koyo Kouoh is the founder of *ROW Material Company* a contemporary art center in Dakar, Senegal, where she works with African artists.



Figure 7. Yinka Shonibare, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, Documenta 11, Fridericianum, Kassel 2002.

Kader Attia created a “space of vulnerability” in his *Museum of Emotion* as a response to his critical and emotional engagement to the legacy of colonialism. The approach differs from the curatorial choices made at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and from what university museums typically do. University museums appear unwilling to engage critically with their collections and to operate in a more self-reflective way. This is because they understand themselves under the umbrella of their universities, and a positive rather than a critical image of the university and its associated institutions.

To “create a space of vulnerability” is what university museums can do in order to help address what Steph Scholten has called “big and uncomfortable questions,”¹⁷ including the legacy of colonialism and the role of academic knowledge in shaping colonialism and imperialism. It is by creating these spaces where people are encouraged to reflect critically that university museums can produce new knowledge and gain a new epistemological function.

The last point I want to underline concerns curatorial practice that, during the last decade, has become more collaborative in which curators actively engage with living artists. Moreover, curatorial practice has been conceived as a practice of research committed to the production of new knowledge and that can have different outcomes: exhibitions, workshops, discussion panels, publications, etc. Exhibitions are no longer understood as the sole outcome of a curatorial project.

Coalesce, curated by Paul O'Neill, is a significant example of a collaborative exhibition model. It was a touring exhibition that engaged with additional artists and curators added to the project that literally coalesced over time. As noted, *Coalesce* was “an on-going exhibitionary project which creates a mutating environment of overlapping painting, video and text-based exhibitions in constant migration and held at key locations.”¹⁸

How museums have been curating the contemporary

Since the 1980s, many major museums have considered issues surrounding ‘being contemporary’ and ‘how to be contemporary,’ including the Louvre and the Centre George Pompidou in Paris, the National Gallery in London, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In order to be contemporary, these museums commissioned a series of off-curatorial interventions, inviting visual artists, filmmakers, and philosophers to work with their collections. In 1985, an outstanding exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou transpired, entitled *Les Immatériaux*, curated by philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, investigating the consequences of the shift from material objects to immaterial information technologies.

Off-curatorial intervention has also been used to highlight controversial themes and ideas, including racism and slavery. Two groundbreaking examples include *The Play of the Unmentionable* by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, and *Mining the Museum* by African American artist Fred Wilson (figure 8). The former dealt with how art has been censored in different cultures throughout history, and the latter investigated how museums, knowingly or unwittingly, exclude minority groups from their collections and exhibitions.¹⁹



Figure 8. Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, 1993.

How university museums can curate the contemporary

Having illustrated some key features that characterize the discourse about curating the contemporary, let's explore how university museums could curate the contemporary. A primary approach for university museums is to grow more open to critical thinking, and to understand themselves as cultural and research centers rather than as didactic vessels for different academic disciplines.

It is my opinion that university museums, more than any other museum types, have a responsibility to engage critically with their collections and to reflect on their past and current practices. That research should be the core mission for university museums, distinguishing them from other museum types.

Practically, university museums can undertake curatorial projects that have critical relevance, and that involve collaboration between scholars and students of different academic disciplines within the university. By becoming ‘working collections’ for curatorial practice, university museum collections can gain a new academic and didactic functions, as well as a new epistemological functions. *Tangible Things* and *Mind the Gut* are two examples of these kinds of projects. Founded on collection based research conducted by Harvard University students over an eight year period, *Tangible Things* was a project that produced a book and an exhibition curated by Laurel Ulrich and Ivan Gaskell at Harvard’s Collection of Historical and Scientific Instruments in 2011 (figure 9). The exhibition brought together two hundred objects from across Harvard’s collection, challenging the rigid division between history, anthropology, science, and the arts, questioning traditional categories of knowledge.



Figure 9. *Tangible Things*, The Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, Harvard University, 2011.



Figure 10. *Mind the Gut*, Medical Museion, Copenhagen.

Mind the Gut is a permanent exhibition installed at the Medical Museion in Copenhagen, curated by Adam Bencard and Louise Whiteley. The exhibition won the International Council of Museum Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) Award in 2019 (figure 10). It is a thought-provoking exhibition that challenges the typical division of brain and gut as two isolated organs by creating an experimental space, designed to foster discussion and reflection.²⁰ It resulted from a collaborative project involving scientists and artists who worked together with museum curatorial staff.

These exhibitions exemplify the far-ranging approaches available to university museum curators that can expand the possibilities to reach further, contributing toward the shaping of new functions of university museums in the 21st century.

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Notes

- ¹ Kader Attia, *The Museum of Emotion*, Hayward Gallery, London, February 13 – May 6, 2019.
- ² Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 63.
- ³ Ivan Gaskell, *Everything or Nothing? What do University Museums know?* (Groningen: The Gerson Lectures Foundation, 2017), 32.
- ⁴ Jan C. Westerhoff, “A World of Signs: Baroque Pansemioticism, the Polyhistor and the Early Modern Wunderkammer,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62 (4), (Oct. 2001): 633.
- ⁵ Gaskell, 6-7.
- ⁶ The Orientation Gallery *Exploring the Past* is on the lower ground floor of the Ashmolean Museum and is divided in five thematic sections: *The Ashmolean Story, Conservation, Textiles, Reading and Writing* and *Money*.
- ⁷ Yoshiaki Nishino, *Made in UMUT* (Tokyo, 2013), 205.
- ⁸ Michael O’Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum. A World Within* (Oxford: Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers Ltd, 2014), 82.
- ⁹ Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Curating as Medium,” *Talking Contemporary Curating*, ed. Terry Smith (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), 115.
- ¹⁰ Claire Bishop, “Museum Models, Radical Spectatorship,” *Talking Contemporary Curating*, ed. Terry Smith (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), 140.
- ¹¹ Brian Kuan Wood (ed), *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 63.
- ¹² See Bishop, 139-140.
- ¹³ Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Asad Raza, *Way of curating* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 163.
- ¹⁴ See Michael Brenson, “The Curator’s Moment,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 57 (4) (December 1998): 19.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 21.
- ¹⁶ Documenta 11 consisted of five platforms, four of which took the form of conferences, debates and workshops on key issues of global concern: “Democracy Unrealized,” “Experiment with Truth,” “Creolité and Creolization,” “Under Siege,” and “Four African Cities.” The fifth platform was the exhibition in Kassel, with the premise “Art is the production of knowledge.”

¹⁷ Steph C. Scholten, "Conceptualizing a twenty-first century university museum: Addressing big and uncomfortable questions" (paper presented at UMAC conference *University Museums and Collection as Cultural Hubs: The Future of Tradition*, Kyoto, September 1-7, 2019).

¹⁸ <http://www.jaimegili.org/group-exhibitions/coalesce.php>, accessed February 25, 2020.

¹⁹ See Jens Hoffmann, *Show time: The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd 2014), 60-61.

²⁰ <https://www.museion.ku.dk/en/mind-the-gut-presse/> accessed February 25, 2020.

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