

# The making and unmaking of the Museum of Movements

## A study of the institutional ontology of museums

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Olga Zabalueva, *"Not all Museums": Memory, politics and museum activism on the move*, Linköping Studies in Arts and Sciences No. 859 (Linköping: Institutionen för kultur och samhälle, Filosofiska fakulteten, Linköpings universitet 2023). 249 pp.

The idea of the museum has in recent years undergone some fundamental changes, and the debate within the *International Council of Museums* (ICOM) between 2016 and 2020 about what a museum is or is supposed to be, is significant in this regard. The organization's traditional definition of a museum, first approved in 1974, focused on collection, preservation, expertise, and exhibitions, and the museum was conceived of as an institution built upon an authoritative, monologic narrative about tangible and intangible heritage of importance to the nation state and national culture. This definition was challenged in 2019 by another much more activist and participatory definition, which conceived of the museum as a polyphonic space, addressing conflicts and challenges of the present society with the aim of contributing to human dignity, social justice, and global equality. After a heated debate, a third proposal gained a majority in 2022 with the purpose of bridging the differences between the two extreme opposites. According to this new definition, a museum is an inclusive, self-reflexive and engaging institution, open to dialogue and participation of the surrounding community, while more political references such as social justice and global equality have been left out (pp. 20–25).

Taking her point of departure in this debate about the definition of the museum, Olga Zabalueva's thesis engages with an analysis of what she labels the "institutional ontology" of contemporary museums. The overall purpose of the thesis is "to elaborate on what can stimulate change in museum

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institutions and instigate new practices" (p. 8). In order to pursue this aim, Zabalueva raises four main research questions: First, how is politics being employed in the process of museum making (and unmaking)? Secondly, why are some issues "difficult" in both the global and the Swedish museum context? The third question is concerned with the role that memory politics plays in the museum-making process, and the last research question asks about the role individual agencies or actors play in constituting socially relevant and sustainable museum practices.

As a case study Olga Zabalueva has chosen to analyze the projected Museum of Movements (MoM) in Malmö and the processes around its projection and later closure. The museum project was initiated by a preliminary feasibility study conducted between 2015 and 2017, i.e. during the so called European "migration crisis". Between 2018 and 2020 the museum project existed with a limited staff, and from late 2019 to the spring of 2020, the staff disposed of a preliminary physical space before this was closed down due to the Covid epidemic. MoM was planned to open as a state museum in the early 2020s with a permanent staff and venue, but the project was cut short of funding by the Swedish Government and the Municipality of Malmö in the fall of 2020. At the end of the same year, it was closed, and the government chose to open the Swedish Holocaust Museum in Stockholm.

The idea of the MoM-project underwent different phases with different titles, but it was basically supposed to cover the concept of "movement" both as a physical movement in space, which in this case means migratory movements, and the concept of "movement" understood as in "social movement". This means that the MoM from the very beginning was planned to focus on one of the most contested issues of our time, migration politics, and to be deeply engaged with the social movements of contemporary civil society. As it is clearly documented by Zabalueva through interviews with museum team members, most of the activities of the staff were dedicated to the creation of a safe space for the marginalized parts of the population and to achieve the trust of those unheard voices. As such, it is an interesting and relevant case for the investigation of the research questions.

Zabalueva's main approach to the object of study is museology and ethnographic fieldwork in combination with memory studies and political philosophy. She takes her point of departure in Chantal Mouffe's concept of "the political",<sup>1</sup> and applies Cento Bull and Hansen's distinction between antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic modes of remembering<sup>2</sup> to the museum definition debate. The overarching conceptual framework rests upon

1. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the Worlds Politically* (New York 2013).

2. Anna Cento Bull & Hans Lauge Hansen, "On Agonistic Memory", *Memory Studies* 9:4 (2016).

Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, and on Mignolo's decolonial critique of Western modernity.

Zabalueva has been following the project of the MoM closely from early on, and she states that she sympathizes with the ideas behind, and identifies very much with the MoM-project. Methodologically speaking she applies what she calls "activist museology", which implies that she openly recognizes her political engagement, and criticizes the notions of objectivity and neutrality, because, as she states, knowledge is always situated, and everybody writes from a certain point of view. This means that an allegedly neutral position also positions itself ideologically, in this case just within the hegemonic power structure. From this explicit and politically engaged point of view she does her fieldwork, qualitative interviews with team members and politicians and performs her critical reading of plans and documents.

In the first chapter, Zabalueva presents the overall aim of the thesis, her research questions, and the theoretical framework that the research rests upon. She also makes some reflections on her own role as a researcher and activist. The first part of the second chapter lays out the recent ICOM debate about the concept of the museum, while the second part analyzes how the political process of the MoM project developed over time with its top-down political decisions and bottom up activist movements. This chapter mainly responds to the first research question. Chapter three raises the question of "difficult issues" in the museum world, such as colonialism, racism, and immigration. A reference is made to the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, which was considered a source of inspiration for the MoM, but the chapter also addresses how such issues are treated in Sweden. Finally, the chapter goes on to summarize the public discussion in Sweden about museum politics, initiated around 2016, where the government was accused of conducting identity politics and thereby favoring the extreme right. This chapter mainly responds to the second research question.

The fourth chapter introduces the field of memory studies, where a special focus is given to Ann Rigney's memory-activism nexus,<sup>3</sup> and to Cento Bull and Hansen's distinction between the different ethico-political modes of remembering, the antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic memory, which, in Zabalueva's view, has important affinities to the MoM. This chapter mainly responds to the third research question. In the fifth chapter Zabalueva examines the internal dynamics of the museum project based on qualitative interviews made with museum teams' members. In different sections of the chapter she focusses on aspects such as the impact of uncertainty, the importance of collaboration, the building of trust, and the significance of

3. Ann Rigney, "Remembering Hope: Transnational activism beyond the traumatic", *Memory Studies* 11:2 (2018) pp. 368–380.

fluidity in organization and management. This chapter mainly responds to research question four. The thesis sums up the findings in a conclusion and a summary in Swedish.

### *Findings*

Through her analysis Zabalueva relates ICOM's three different definitions of the museum (the traditional, the radical but rejected proposal of a new definition, and the compromise that finally was accepted) to three different institutions, but she also includes the three different ethico-political modes of remembering coined by Cento Bull and Hansen. According to Zabalueva, the traditional, national museum corresponds to the old ICOM definition, and rests upon an antagonistic remembering mode. This kind of institution is built upon a monologic narrative, which in cases of war and social conflict ties a clear us/them distinction to moral categories such as good and brave heroes pitted against evil enemies. In relation to migration issues, this would translate into a celebration of national culture and a more or less xenophobic depiction of the cultural "other". The Swedish Holocaust Museum corresponds well with ICOM's new definition from 2022, which rests upon Cento Bull and Hansen's cosmopolitan remembering mode. Zabalueva claims that this institution treats the past as a foreign country (the past is past), and that it focusses on the sufferings of the victims without historical or political contextualization, whereby it tends to depoliticize not only the past, but also the relation between past and present. It fosters, as Zabalueva puts it, the narrative of the good, Swedish state in a self-reflexive way, including multiple voices in a basically consensual dialogue that praises democracy and human rights. The same goes for the initial political top-down framing of the MoM, and the processes of control and regulations from the state and City Hall.

In the latter part of the museums period of existence, the project team of the MoM, for its part, worked bottom-up with the aim of forging trust from the grassroots and social movements, and this kind of institution would, according to Zabalueva, correspond well with the rejected ICOM definition, and it would further fit into Cento Bull & Hansen's idea of an agonistic remembering mode. This mode contextualizes the conflicts of the past historically and politically (such as migration and colonialism), and it traces the relation of past conflicts into the present (in the case of colonialism into global inequality and racism). This kind of institution does not shy away from difficult issues in the present, and it gives voice to all parties involved in the conflict without losing its basic aim: to foster collaboration with and among social movements working for social justice and global equality.

Through her analysis of the empirical material consisting of meeting pro-

tocols, official documents and qualitative interviews with politicians and project team members, Zabalueva reveals how the MOM project was created in a constant tension between different conceptions of what the museum was meant to be: a cosmopolitan museum celebrating Sweden as an inclusive country, built upon human rights and social democratic visions of justice, or an activist museum inviting migrant and refugee voices to tell the story of the intimate relationship between colonialism and contemporary racism.

All the way through the thesis Zabalueva examines the multiple possible explanations of the political processes leading to the closure of the museum. She also shows how these differences in goals translate into tensions between top-down and bottom-up processes. On the one hand a political request of control through tangible milestones and concrete results, and on the other hand bottom-up bonding and forging of trust towards grassroots and social movements in Malmö. Especially in chapter five she exposes the radical democratic and activist character of the MoM-project. She shows how the project team members patiently insisted upon participatory and co-creative processes, and how this patience eroded the credibility of the project in the eyes of the authorities.

### *Final remarks*

The theoretical framework of the thesis is adequate and well applied, and she manages well the different approaches from museology, memory studies, and political philosophy etc.

Zabalueva's analysis of her empirical data is thorough, and her engagement and persistence over time allows her to gain insight into and describe the processes, power relations and dispositions related to the creation and dismantling of the MoM, which is original and seldom seen. However, the complexity of reality seems in the end to obfuscate the clarity of conclusions, and Zabalueva leaves the reader in lack of a clear judgement: who took the final decision to close down the MoM, and why?

Given the importance of citizens' participation not only in the MoM, but also in the debate about what a museum is or ought to be, and given the fact that Zabalueva actually uses concepts such as "collaboration", "co-creation", and "participation" etc. in relation to the activities of the MoM (pp. 158–160 and 191, 192), it is puzzling that she does not provide a clear definition of these terms or in other ways include participatory theory. There is only one single reference to Nina Simon (p. 53). Could a theoretically informed analysis of the different forms of participation have been a way to distinguish more precisely between what is feasible/acceptable and what is not, being a state institution? Could it have allowed her to distinguish between different forms of external collaboration and what a member of the team calls a

"redistribution of public funding" (p. 196)? Could it have provided an even more nuanced and precise analysis?

Zabalueva's fieldwork methodology brings her very close to her object of study, so close that she mentions that the MoM not only became an analytical subject, but rather a subject position for her research (p. 45). The activist museology gives her unique access to data, information and a deep understanding of extremely complex processes. She is constantly aware of her own positionality, but her strong identification with the MoM (p. 55) puts her in a vulnerable position. It opens up for a critique of not maintaining a critical distance to the object of study. However, Zabalueva understands museology as a practice not external to museums and to the changing role of these institutions, but as an intrinsic part of this development. As she herself puts it: "Writing with museums about museums can be a form of resistance; a mode of knowledge production that does not sit silently on the library shelves but can promote social change" (p. 55).