The Politics of Museums in Europe:
Representations, Diversity, Doxa

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Abstract

Museums are political institutions. In their formative period they where part of the formation of national identities. Today there is a growing political imperative to represent the diversity of Europe. Through an elaboration of the different aspects of the concept of representation, covered by the German terms vertretung, darstellung and vorstellung, the connections between aesthetics, knowledge and politics is shown. This is furthered through a reading of Jaqcues Rancière's philosophy arguing for the political power and importance of aesthetics. The political importance of distinguishing between being a representative and being a creator of representations is also stressed. Representations are thus shown to be central to politics, and museums are presented as important and powerful institutions for political representation.

Key Words

Representation, Museums, Politics, Aesthetics, Philosophy, Doxa, Rancière

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Introduction

Museums are political institutions. The very idea of museums was born in the era of nationalism, as a means to foster the people into nationals and citizens. Many nationalistic projects are today under re-evaluation under pressure from globalization, large scale immigration and regionalization. Historical research has shown the construed nature of the national narratives and symbols that the Museums of the nationalistic era built their exhibitions around (Hobsbawm, 1992, Aronsson & Hillström, 2007).

This article theorizes on the possible and actual political use of museums today. The main theoretical vehicles will be the concept of representation and the writings of French philosopher Jacques Rancière.

Experiencing Diversity

Reality is always in motion. It is impossible to find any place, any restricted present, where an observer can come to rest and from where he could experience and understand the world. This is one of the postulates of deconstructivist theory.

As soon as one tries to find a firm grounding a displacement takes place, time runs away from the spectator and a difference between a time just past and the present arises. It is therefore impossible to make a difference between an original present that the representation is to represent (Derrida, 1973). It is now 30 years since this statement was provoking. But we still need to figure out what it means for political practice.

A practical example: One of the big contemporary political issues is how to manage what is seen as the new diversity of Europe. Globalization has brought about large scale migration to Europe. Regionalization has opened spaces for minority identities and languages suppressed in the formation of nation states. In many European countries there are strong populistic parties that feed on dreams of national harmony and belonging in a time before migration. These dreams need to be tackled, and one of the political tools used is to make museums represent the nation's diversity in an inclusive and positive manner. There is also a rise in local museums dedicated to identities formerly discarded as unmodern and backwards. European museums need to find out how to represent/exhibit diversity (Sandell, 2007).

But the concept of diversity is used to describe the lives of all the millions of unique individuals that live their lives in Europe. Modern national museums suppressed diversity in the interest of national cohesion and commonality. The exhibition of national culture concentrated on similarities and the evolutionary history of the nation. Diversity was allotted to the ethnographic museums that displayed the diversity of premodern life outside of the nation, both of minorities within the state and traditional peoples globally. Collections from the unmodern peoples of the territory were held by the ethnographic museums, or even the museums of natural history. They were considered remnants from lower evolutionary stages. (Knell, Macleod & Watson, 2007, Sandell, 2007)

Today the ideological imperative has changed to the opposite. The dominating contemporary political ambition for museums is to exhibit the diversity of the nations, and the unity and similarity between all peoples of the planet. Collections from the minorities of the national territory are often relocated to the national history museums and written in to the new narration of the nation. What was formerly seen as pockets of undeveloped barbarism, now become assets for tourism and national pride (Dicks, 2003). Ethnographic museums focus on commonalities and abandon the evolutionary narrative for stories about common human traits and impacts of globalization. This is an ideological shift. In itself it says very little about any shifts in the reality for living persons on the planet, or whether there is more or less diversity in Europe or the world today than before.

We need to set some parameters before we know what kind of diversity we are looking for – economic, cultural, sexual, ethnic, linguistic? It seems obvious that it is impossible to measure any total sum of diversity. Different parameters have had different developments, some may have increased in some Euorpean nations, some may have decreased, and others have become accepted and therefore more visible without any real increase.

Representation

Our only way of grasping what is present is to represent it in epistemological or aesthetic forms. But what does it mean to represent something (diversity for example)? The English word representation carries three rather different meanings or aspects (that in for example German is described with three different words).

To represent can mean to be a representative. In German this aspect is called *vertretung*. For this kind of representation to be legitimate the representative must be selected in a democratic fashion by those represented. The selected representative should voice the concerns of those she represents, not pursuing her own interests (Ankersmit, 2002).

To represent can also mean to make something present again, to copy or interpret it. This aspect of representation is covered by the German word *darstellung*. It concerns artistic and aesthetic work. It is hard to talk about legitimacy in this type of representation; it can instead be for example moving, or instructive (Hartley, 2003).

A representation can also be a mental idea, image or understanding of an object or phenomenon: *vorstellung* in German. This is an epistemological, philosophical and psychological concept. Legitimate mental representations (*vorstellungen*) should correspond with reality, be true (Ankersmit, 2001). If there is too much discrepancy between your mental representations and those accepted in your society (*doxa*) it might lead to psychological problems. If a student's representation of a certain topic differs from that of her professor she will not pass the exams.

As presented in the opening paragraph of this article it is not possible to measure representation against an objective reality. Truth is rather what corresponds to the *doxa*

of the oligarchic governments, and taking the power over life from the hands of Wealth. Democracy is an act, not a system or a form.

In other works Rancière (2004a) stresses that the essence of politics consists in what he calls interrupting the distribution of the sensible. The drawing of the lots has its counterpart in the political act of supplementing the 'normal' oligarchic distribution of the sensible with a an aesthetic form that opens a space for those who up till then has no part in what he calls the perceptual coordinates of the community. Such redistribution opens new fields of possibilities for the action of unrepresented parts of society. So politics is not everything in society immersed with power. A political event is where a meeting between the policing and the egalitarian logics comes about. That said, it is important to note that Rancière in many respect is very foucauldian and that he shares Foucault's views on the very broad reach of the policing logic (2007a).

Small things, as the changing of names, can result in a clash between logics and disrupt the political distribution. In *On the shores of politics* (2007b) Rancière gives the example of the juridical process against Auguste Blanqui in France in 1832. When asked by the court about his profession Blanqui stated 'proletarian'. The judge claimed that 'proletarian' was not an occupation, whereby Blanqui answered that it was the occupation of the majority of the people and that they had been deprived of their political rights. Rancière reads this moment as a subjectivation of the people that had not been part of the symbolic constitution of society. The majority of people could by the name of proletarian become visible; thereby the political field had changed.

Museums and Political Representation

Museums are involved in *darstellung*. The need to represent for example diversity in Europe today is connected both to a felt need to have a better *vertretung* for newer groups in European societies and a parallel need to encourage truer *vorstellungen* of the situation in Europe (Sandell, 2007). But to think that our *darstellungen* or *vorstellungen* can work as *vertretungen* is ultimately undemocratic and would carry a belief in an objective present that an objective observer can represent in the interest of others (Spivak, 1988, Hartley, 2003).

The impossibility of objective representation means that we always must choose what to represent, and therefore we are always responsible for that choice. It becomes a moral question. There is no way we can come to a conclusive answer. That means that the exhibits Museums make can never be proven to be true, they can only be legitimate or not.

In relation to the *vorstellung*-aspect of representation I think it is high time to contemplate the relation between diversity and doxa. If many European states have experienced large immigration this would mean that the traditional national doxa might be problematic. As touched upon in the presentation of the national museums of the 19th century this doxa has always been a construction excluding peasants, minorities, women, children,

homosexuals and any other deviating from modernistic normality. The last 40 years have seen fantastic work showing how science, politics and any other field have taken specific form because of the fact that almost only European males where the originators of the doxa of modernity (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

The established doxa of most European states carry this bias. A more legitimate representation must work with materials from other traditions.

The rational knowledge revered by modernity's big philosophers such as Descartes, Kant and Husserl is episteme, which is connected with empiricism and rationalism. But the division between episteme and doxa was not only a philosophical and scientific decision in the interest of truth. It was a decision upheld in a colonial environment and also excluded a lot of local, non-European knowledge that was articulated in different ways, and therefore not recognised as epistemic knowledge by modernity (Mignolo, 1999). A lot of important local knowledge was thus lost forever, but some of it is still possible to reactivate. Walter Mignolo promotes a concept of border thinking as a method to include several traditions/doxai in the construction of decolonial knowledge (Alcoff, 2007).

Mignolo describes modern European doxa as colonial knowledge, stressing that this knowledge was used to gain control over nature and other peoples, by suppressing other ways of knowing. European doxa can no longer allowed to judge over other forms of knowledge (Mignolo, 1999).

Border thinking must recognise the colonising aspects of modern European doxa, and use local resources to confront and alter its representations (*vorstellungen*) in order to know the diverse lives lived in Europe better. A legitimate representation can no longer be construed from an unproblematic belonging to only the modern European doxa, nor can it be entangled only in another local doxa (Grinell, 2010).

Legitimate political representation on the other hand must be built on a mandate from those represented (*vertreten*). Such a political goal would change the role of museums drastically.

Since most museums are funded by public money there is a legitimate democratic demand that they should cater for all citizens, irrespective of their cultural and geographical genealogies. A fundamental problem is that museums most often are far from being elected as the legitimate representatives of those understood as diverse from the perspective of modern European doxa. A simple cooperation with stake holder groups is not a satisfactory solution (Crooke, 2008). A cultural community is very seldom a democratic organisation. The preferred cultural representatives are very often from the group's oligarchy. To take their voice as an authentic representation is very problematic. To use the problems of legitimate representation of stake-holder groups as an excuse to carry on in the old objectivistic tracks is not very good either (Karp, Kratz & Szwaja, 2007).

Involving stake holders is good and something that must be done to fill the democratic mission of museums. Self-representation is a fundamental right that must be given to stake holders of museum collections. (Marstine, 2006) But inviting representatives of stake holder groups can never make an exhibition into a legitimate representation (vertretung). In the choice of whom to invite as a stake holder representative the drawing of lots might be a good way to go about things.

Being open with such a procedure would also kill the lingering belief in stake holder representatives as culturally representative exemplars of their community. Such representativity simply does not exist.

Rancière and Aesthetic Representation

Rancière makes no real distinction between aesthetics and politics; rather he talks about particular aesthetico-political regimes. There are correlations between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics, he states, but refuses to give any criteria for how those correlations work. The theoretical analysis of such correlations is of course also carried out within a specific aesthetic form.

This can be seen as a very sense-centered way of thinking, as the title of the main interview in his best seller *The politics of aesthetics* (2004a) shows – ''The distribution of the sensible''. Aesthetics and politics – and theory and most everything else – is tied together by the fact that it is fundamentally a continuous redistribution of the sensible. We sense the world differently when we have seen it represented (*darstellt*) in a new way. It all is about defining the boundaries of what is visible, audible, and thereby thinkable, open for new representations (*vorstellungen*).

It might be helpful to give a brief outline of Rancière's understanding of the academic field of aesthetics, as presented in the introduction to his book *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (2004b, *not yet in English translation*). He says that the discourse of aesthetics came to being some 200 years ago. Aesthetics is not the name of a discipline, though, it is rather a specific regime for the identification of art. Its birth is connected to the subsumation of the fine arts into Art, having a starting point in the writings of Immanuel Kant. The birth of aesthetics is also the death of representation, according to Rancière. He uses representation in a foucauldian sense making it a synonym to mimesis. Mimesis is *darstellung*, but the end of mimesis in Art does not mean an end for de-picting. Rather it takes away the tie between the representation (*darstellungen*) and the object and makes the connection between the work of art and the sensible effect it produces central. This is aesthetics according to Rancière (2004b). In our terminology the artistic representations relates more to *vorstellungen* than *darstellungen*.

Art is not political because of the messages or feelings about the state of the world that it conveys. It is not political because of the way it represents the structures and con-

flicts of society. Art is political because it distances itself from these functions; it is political in that it creates a different kind of time and space and through the ways that it peoples these timespaces. It is not so much related to vertretung as to vorstellung.

One could read this as claiming that aesthetics is everywhere. That is somewhat correct, but must be understood in a more precise way. In ''The distribution of the sensible'' Rancière writes:

> The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. This proposition should be distinguished from any discourse – positive or negative – according to which everything is 'narrative', with alternations between 'grand' narratives and 'minor' narratives. The notion of 'narrative' locks us into oppositions between the real and artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructivists are lost. (2004a:38)

Thinking is fictionalization, Rancière states. It can be read as a precision of the statement that knowledge is doxa. So of course there is no representation beyond, before or besides aesthetics. Being scientifically sound, producing legitimate representations (*vorstellungen*), is not a matter of being free from fictionalization; it is a matter of what the building blocks for the fictionalized thoughts are, what doxai it activates.

In *The future of the image* (2007c) Rancière talks about how the contemporary aesthetic regime is not about mimesis. Its form is assemblage and montage; it is about rhythm in contrast to the old common belief in a specific measure for each art form. The contemporary aesthetic regime takes its beginning with the German idealists in the early 19th Century when Art was born and the measures where lost; from then on we have nothing to measure the works of art against. The power of works of art comes from the commonality of chaos; it is about having a rhythm that relates to this common chaos.

In the representational regime there was a relationship between image and text, relevant for example for museum presentations. The textual part was carrying the ideal chain of events of the narrative, whereas the function of the pictorial part was to give it concrete flesh and a more permanent sense of presence.

This harmonious unit is no longer functional. In the contemporary aesthetical regime we instead have what Rancière calls the phrase-image (2007a). The function of the phrase is still to join and create a sense of commonality, but now the textual phrase joins because it gives a kind of permanence to the chaos, while the image carries an active and eruptive power. The phrase-image is thus more capable of representing diversity than the modern, relational text-image unit.

But the attaching of everything with everything else, that in the beginning of the contemporary aesthetic regime was seen as subversive and radical is today more and more

trapped by the babble of advertising that is not in favour of a redistribution of the sensible, which do not want to challenge the established representation (*vorstellung*) (2007a).

Good art, as I understand Rancière is a montage that makes new connections, which can create a shock or a collision that creates an other order. Good art is a deviation that reveals an other world, which creates a redistribution of the sensible that opens new spaces and makes room for new political subjects. But it is not simply about creating oppositions. I would like to interpret Rancière in support for border thinking. By way of border thinking we might deviate from the hegemonic doxa and give room for new political subjects. They will also gain legitimacy as the upholders of the doxa we need in order to understand the world better, to get a better, more just representation (*vorstellung*) of it.

Rancière rather sees that contemporary art is less and less interested in the once popular work aiming at creating a feeling for the rift between the forms of everyday life and the laws of repression. Today he sees a neo-symbolistic and neo-humanistic tendency involved with surveying traces of commonality and celebrating the power of the world and the visual. He doesn't seem totally happy with this, I think.

The Possibilities of Museum Aesthetics

The practical use of Rancière for museum representation might not be obvious. In relation to legitimate political representation his philosophy is interesting and important. Working together with stake holders has become a standard and obligatory part of the ideal museum exhibition. But this is often presented as a solution to the problems of representation connected to classical museums. A more elaborate understanding of representation makes it clear that there are a lot of problems that cannot be solved simply by that method.

The role of museums cannot be to be political representatives (*vertreter*) of any group in society. I think the public funders must create other arenas to solve the lack of political representation for the excluded groups in society. At the same time this is no excuse to hide from the moral responsibility immanent to the complexity of representation, even in aesthetic (*darstellung*) or epistemological (*vorstellung*) representation there is a political (*vertretung*) representation that has to be addressed responsibly.

But there is also another take on the possibilities of museums aesthetics. A rational argument about the state of the world has seldom made anybody change their way of living, their representations (*vorstellungen*), in Rancièrian terms it seldom create any redistribution of the sensible. An aesthetic representation involves other possibilities. Good aesthetics representation does create a redistribution of the sensible and can thereby touch people in a way that rational argumentation can not. Museums are thereby important political arenas.

I would also like to stress the importance of Rancière's insistence on the sensible that have a broader reach than a focus on mental representations. The modern European doxa has been to unidimensional in its rationalism. It not only excluded belief (doxa), but also experiences that are not translatable into rational understanding (*vorstellung*). The borders to sensatory knowledge should also be opened, the aesthetical qualities experienced through sight and sound carry their own value, the same should go for taste and touch. Maybe a truer rancièreian way would be to talk about border sensing rather than border thinking?

A well preformed museum exhibition of a subject connected to a specific group of people not having a voice in other public arenas can make new things become thinkable; thereby changing the political field and making new aspects of society sensible.

Rancière touches upon the question of epistemological representation in his book *The ignorant schoolmaster* (1991) about the pedagogical ideas of Joseph Jacotot, who in the early 19th century developed a method for showing that illiterate parents could teach their children to read. The primary concern of the book is how intellectual emancipation is possible from within every person.

The representation of knowledge does not require a knowing person explicating that which shall be learned. Jacotot's favourite mode of learning was trough recounting, since in storytelling there is an innate presumption about the equality of the listener, rather than a focus on the inequality of knowledge between the two parts. I would very much like this supposition to be a ground for the approach of museum exhibitions towards its audience. The aesthetic and pedagogical form must not aim at transmitting a fixed representation (*vorstellung*), but encourage visitors to sense new aspects, make new connections and activate their own experiences in creative directions.

Another lesson of *The ignorant schoolmaster* is that intellectual emancipation is about knowledge (*wissen*), not only about a change in perception. Emancipation cannot come about merely through a redistribution of the sensible opening a space for new political subjects. If we shall be able to act upon that redistribution, we also need abilities and knowledge. The schoolmaster is as important as the artist or the politican.

From this perspective the museum exhibition can be seen as a powerful art form, combining the practices of scientific traditions (the material and method of the schoolmaster) with professional aesthetic representations (the method of the artist). In contrast to art a well informed exhibition, built with a belief in the mutual intelligence of the spectator, can create not only a redistribution of the sensible, it might also be part of intellectual emancipation as it lets people develop their knowledge and power to act upon it. Museums are thus intrinsically political.

Ending on an utopian credo and exclamation: Museums should take pride in their art form and argue for its abilities to make powerful representations (*darstellungen*) of different aspects of society and open for new and more just representations (*vorstellungen*). Museums must take responsibility for and acknowledge their own political missions and agendas. They can never represent (*vertreten*) anyone else but their funders and/or themselves.

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