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The Right to the Museum: From the White Cube to the Critical Museum

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Abstract

As the museum ecosystem undergoes a process of de- and re-articulation — politically and aesthetically affecting cultural and artistic institutions — museums are increasingly becoming hybrid and transdisciplinary entities. Building on this, the article draws upon institutional critique and critical museology to explore the reconceptualization of the museum as a critical institution: one endowed with social agency and accountability towards the communities that host and engage with it. Focusing on the urban dimension, the article examines the relationship between museums and the premises and practices of critical urbanism, mapping how their interactions with the cities they inhabit have evolved. In doing so, and while intentionally avoiding a developmentalist perspective, the discussion adopts a historical lens — tracing the museum's trajectory from its industrial emergence through its modernist evolution to its current decolonial and critical reinterpretations. This retrospective provides a foundation to reconsider the museum's role as an urban actor, proposing a parallel between two key rights: the right to the city and the right to the museum. The argument is further grounded through the analysis of two case studies, which, alongside the theoretical framework, illustrate how museum practices can serve as a means of reengaging with urban experience.

Keywords: Institutional critique; Critical urbanism; Museum studies; Decolonial museum.

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1 Introduction

The museum community worldwide is today engaging in a process of de- and re- articulation of art institutions, both theoretically — examining museums from different angles, with unconventional approaches and through diverse disciplinary frameworks — and practically — updating and diversifying museum praxis, by putting into practice such research work.

While early museology privileged a material perspective to study the museum, focusing for example on the acts of collecting, archiving and preserving, more recent approaches, which can be grouped under the label of new museology, aimed to emphasize the relational dimension of the museum, its social and political role, and the communicative and cultural dynamics it triggers — and that, in turn, fuel it (Vergo, 1989; McCall & Gray, 2013; Mayrand, 2014).

This shift is evidenced, among other things, by the International Council of Museums (ICOM)[1] debate regarding the official museum definition. The latter, since the organization was founded, has observed a gradual, far from linear, change, that has moved the focus from more material routines (archiving, exhibiting, collecting, cataloguing) to immaterial practices hosted by the museum (now emphasized as an institution in service of society and open to inclusive community participation).

In the research community, a crucial passage of such epistemic shift implied putting museology in a dialogue with different disciplines, paving the way for hybrid research paths which stem from the intersection between museum studies and other cultural and political sciences. As a consequence of that, today museum studies certainly constitute a wide and diversified field: for example, many scholars have devoted themselves to investigate museums from a technological point of view (Tallon & Walker, 2008), while others tried to look at it from an anthropological and ethnographical one (Watson, 2007), or even to delve into their economic dimension (Caldwell, 2000; Camarero et al., 2011).

Building on this distinguishing trans-disciplinarity, and holding it as a fruitful resource to overcome limiting disciplinary boundaries (Nicolescu, 2010), my attempt in this paper is to follow the trajectories of institutional critique and critical museology to investigate the reconceptualization of the museum as a critical institution, i.e., an institution charged with social agency and accountability towards the communities that host it and make use of it (Raunig, 2007; Raunig & Ray, 2009; Dewdney et al., 2013; Kompatsiaris, 2017; Melia, 2022). To narrow the scope of my investigation, I will focus on one of the crucial dimensions of this idea of cultural institution, namely its relationship with the city. For this reason, I will approach the subject standing at the crossroads of critical museology and urban sociology and, more specifically, building on the critical urbanism approach (Brenner et al., 2012). The significance of this intersection is grounded in two main motivations: the first is that, as I already mentioned, previous research has already proven the value of transdisciplinary perspectives in museum studies. The second reason, which as a matter of fact mirrors the first, concerns the reciprocity of this encounter. Indeed, contemporary cities are involved in processes that call for the need to broaden the methods and techniques apt to study them: it is the case, for example, of urban social movements, which are increasingly more open and diverse in their means, sites and actors of contestation (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015 & 2022; Deriu & Putini, 2022).

1. Founded in 1946, The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is an international non governmental organization of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the research, conservation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage. More information about ICOM's activities can be found on its official website: https://icom.museum/en/

While I aim to eschew a developmentalist stance, often biasing museum studies and affecting cultural studies more generally, I will adopt a diachronic perspective, trying to grasp and reassemble how the relationship between museums and the cities they inhabit has changed, from a narrative, political and civic perspective. First of all, I will attempt to retrace the historical development of this relationship, discussing its main characteristics at the time of the emergence of the modern museum in the West, which, not coincidentally, also represents a turning point in the process of industrial urbanization (Duncan & Wallach, 1978; Vergo, 1989; Bennett, 1995; Mollona, 2021). Looking at the past is an essential step in analysing the relationship the museum currently has with the city that hosts it, particularly as envisioned by the approaches of critical museology. To reach this point, however, it will be necessary to retrace, even if briefly and by no means exhaustively, some key moments in the history of museum studies that have enabled critical branches, such as decolonial museology, and cultural studies in general, which have primarily revealed the museum's non neutrality.

Finally, I will focus on examining the museum/city connection, drawing on critical conceptual resources: going beyond strictly museological approaches, such as institutional critique and critical museology, I will adopt a transdisciplinary stance, attempting to bridge the latter with selected contributions from critical urbanism. This connection will help me interpret the role of the artistic institution as an urban actor, advancing a parallel between two rights: the right to the city, already theorized by Lefebvre (1967), and the right to the museum. This discussion will also be supported by the analysis of two case studies, which, together with the theoretical work, demonstrate the possibility of understanding museum practice as a significant moment of de- and re-articulation of the ways of experiencing the city.

2 Display, Define and Discipline: The Role of the Museum in the Modern Society

Museum studies today are markedly characterised by a reflexive and critical stance, engaging in a problematisation of the museum's role and placing the latter at the centre of a broader political and social discussion. Transdisciplinary dialogue, as a matter of fact, is a key feature of contemporary museology. It makes possibile to set up research trajectories that intersect with the branches of ecology, human geography and other social sciences, to the extent that the very premises of traditional disciplinary boundaries are challenged (Nicolescu, 2010). Transdiciplinarity, therefore, is one of the pillars of those approaches that address museum critically, such as post-critical museology and institutional critique (Raunig & Ray, 2009; Dewdney et al., 2012; Byrne et al., 2018). Such approaches, while they differ in their formal definitions, means and scopes of analysis, share some key premises: one of these is the acknowledgment of the museum's non neutrality. One may think, to this regard, about museums' historical involvement in the colonialist project of the modern West, which has been carefully concealed through the aegis of artistic abstraction, or, on the other hand, has been addressed through its renovated role in social movements, represented for example by the 2011 Occupy Museums movement.[2] This awareness is decidedly indebted to a transdisciplinary perspective, as it is through the influence of decolonial cultural studies that the first attempts to discuss and dismantle the colonial role of the museum emerged (Said, 1977; Césaire, 2000; Berger, 2002; Bonilla, 2019).

2. Occupy Museums is a movement initiated in the first month of Occupy Wall Street protests. Its aim is to involve cultural institutions in the debate regarding economic and social inequalities. https://occupymuseums.org/

While such debate is relatively new, however, museum have never been neutral spaces apt to contain and display artworks and other valuable objects. Rather, museums have been, historically, leading devices in moulding the modern experience, as they bind themselves to certain processes typical of modernity itself: among others, those of metropolitan massification; of national identity definition; of linear gnoseological construction. In the modern scenario, museums played on the cultural layer the very same role the factory had on the productive one: both acted as pivots around which the newborn metropolitan society deployed its organisation. Born along with it, the museum became in fact a mandatory institution for every true metropolis produced by the Industrial Revolution, embodying, organising, and displaying the dominating narratives of the latter. Among these, the most iconic ones are: the myth of progress, the scientist principle and the encyclopaedic, developmentalist epistemology; the debut, and the discursive fabrication, of a new collective subject, i.e. the metropolitan masses; the ideological construction of the Nation State. Each of these storylines strongly affects the modern format of the museum. According to Vergo (1989), indeed, they materialize into some key properties of the modern museum: the core function of the permanent collection, which stood for a manifestation of the effort of scientific objectivation, and as the output of an encyclopaedic epistemology; the authoritarian voice, which contributed to historicize and legitimize the ideological construction of the Nation State; the pedagogical and normative stance toward its audience, which exercised a governmental power (Foucault, 2008).

The relationship between the museum and the metropolis during modernity is essential to grasp its role in contemporary urban processes, emphasizing how such role has not just emerged in contemporary times, but rather showing it as a historicized, complex and situated process. Bennett (1995), for example, argues that the public museum of the 20th century should be understood both as a place of instruction and as a reformatory of manners, in which a wide range of social routines and performances were established in order to define and regulate the collective social experience in modern metropolis. Thus, he invites us to conceive the public museum as an exemplifier of the development of a "new governmental relation to culture", which envisioned the latter and its artifacts as forces enlisted in "new ways for new tasks of social management", inasmuch as "instruments capable of 'lifting' the cultural level of the population".

Hence, one of the problems the museum faced back then was how to regulate the conduct of their visitors. This, in the rising metropolitan landscape, was neither an easy duty nor a minor one, as evidenced by many authors of the period. In 1848, for example, the English social reformer James Silk Buckingham (1849) in its plan for a model town ranked museums and art galleries among those urban features capable of bringing citizens closer to "moral sentiments, generous feelings and religious and devout convictions and conduct". Not to mention the account given by Sir Henry Cole (Cole et al., 1889) — the founder of the Victoria and Albert Museum itself — who defined museums as antidotes to what he refers to as the "Gin Palace".

Museums, like other public spaces and institutions of the late 19th century, are then identifiable as governmental devices (Foucault, 2008), conceived to regulate the external appearance of the city as well as to watch over the citizen's inner morality. Thus, they became key elements in the construction of both the *forma urbis* and the urban *persona*. While directing and monitoring the population's behaviour, museums were also understood as gatekeepers of a legitimate knowledge, naturalized as objective and neutral. With the unfolding of the Industrial Revolution this authority took on a further nuance. Such epistemological objectivation soon translated into an aesthetic one, that aimed to claim which (and whose) taste was the right one. The 20th century art museum, in fact, was born as a project of an emerging bourgeoisie and its efforts in establishing a cultural hegemony and developing self-awareness as a metropolitan

class (Wallach, 2010; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Gramsci, 1975). To this regard, Duncan and Wallach (1978), for example, investigated the semantic dimension of museums, interrogating their material elements in order to outline their characteristic ideological role. This meticulous iconographic and semantic analysis ultimately let them juxtapose the museum of the modern era to what the church or the temple stood for in previous times, recognizing it as one of the key late capitalist rituals. According to the authors, in fact, when they enter the museum, the visitor become a character in an intricate architectural script which, indeed, is reminiscent of a religious ceremony. This argument was made through the study of the New York's Museum of Modern Art (the MoMa): unsurprisingly, the very same prototype which inspired the museological concept of the White Cube. The White Cube, elaborated by Alfred Barr (MoMa's first director) in the late 20th century, signalled the passage from the typical early-modern exhibition format — i.e., the so-called universal survey museum — to the contemporary art museum, reconceived as an aseptic and ascetic space apt to abstract and sublimate the work of art in its purely aesthetic function (Staniszewski, 1988). Hence, aiming to stress the autonomy of the work of art, freed from its mundane constraints, the White Cube also ended up feeding yet another autonomy: that of the viewer. The process triggered by the White Cube is then twofold: while it subsumed the original functions and meanings of the artworks through its "aestheticizing and transformational power", it also emphasized the "sense of individualism" and of an "idealized, ahistorical subjectivity" of the visitor (Staniszewski, 1988).

Self-proclaimed neutral space par excellence, able to veil the processes it itself triggers, the White Cube reaches the longed-for purpose of translating into the artistic idiom the capitalist ideology, becoming a "monument to individualism", which in its turn is understood as "subjective freedom" (Duncan & Wallach, 1978). Free of a "message for the public world", the blankness of its walls represents "the separation of public and private" and dramatize the moment of passage from the everyday world to the contemplation of higher values: "salvation, understood as a male norm, is alienation from the mother and her realm. It is integration with spirit light, intellect" (Duncan & Wallach, 1978). The one reflected by the translucent walls of the White Cube is an image of glossy modernity and liberalism, while the Bauhaus inspired design of the building are reminders of the scientist and developmentalist rationality which are the very pillars of the museum. In such an environment, visitors are almost physically silenced and the experience they are invited to is a very private one. A walk at the MoMa is then a walk outside the irrational, out of control everyday life, and towards a higher path of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. The museum's pilgrim experiences the struggle between the material and the spiritual — a typically Western dichotomy — and, if successful, he (or she, but preferably he) endures the triumph of aesthetic detachment. This process, in the museum, happens through a parcelization and individualization of space which symptomatically recalls the wider transformation investing the urban landscape in that same period (Schmid, 2012). Indeed, rather than being a symptom of the loss of the museum's relationship with the city and the citizen, which previously unfolded along the lines of governmental control, it can be interpreted as a manifestation of a new mode of regulation, which stands in line with the individualization efforts typical of capitalist ideology. Urban studies, in fact, offer an interesting angle to read this process. Observed from here the early capitalist proposal of what the museum ought to be, clearly echoes the individualization of the daily experience offered by capitalism rationality, which will progressively take the form of the neoliberal personalization frenzy (Giroux, 2011; Biesta, 2014). The nexus between art and capitalism is not a newly discovered matter: to this regard, for example, Italian scholar Mollona (2021), makes an interesting case in his comparative assessment of the logic of capitalism and that of Western art. Both, in fact, are centred on

defunctionalisation, abstraction and commodification. In his words (Mollona, 2021),

> A royal portrait by Titian beautifies the colonialist; a monument to the unknown soldiers justifies imperial expansion; a photo of a working-class slum legitimizes its clearance. Hence, I consider art as a "capitalism's double" — the bourgeois ideology of aesthetics as a separate realm of life is the double of the bourgeois ideology of the separate realm of economics and the figure of the artists is the double of the Homo economicus (p. 5).

Thus, the project of abstraction of the modern art museum is firmly bound to the capitalist project, in which the museum is acknowledged as a useful political device. As showed by Duncan and Wallach, this is even reflected by museums material qualities, architectural repertoires and curatorial resources, set up to perfectly package the paradigm of the visitor experience.

The link between the capitalist rationality and the museum materiality may be as well interpreted as a result, or a facet, of the tie between capitalism and urban space, which has already been extensively treated by Lefebvre (1967, 1996, 2009). The French scholar, in fact, demonstrated throughout his conspicuous work how space is substantially social, as it is permeated with social relations, and it is both productive of, and produced by those. He also clearly exposed the more specific case of the capitalist city, arguing that the planning of the modern economy tends to manifest itself into spatial planning, to the extent that it is possible to recognize "a space of capitalism": that is, the space "of the society managed and dominated by the bourgeoisie" (Lefebvre, 2009). According to Lefebvre, thus, capitalist processes resulted in the production city which, just as the White Cube, is an abstract space reflecting the rationality of business and capitalist accumulation. Two crucial features of this abstract space — which only appear to contradict each other — are homogenization and individualization. While again Lefebvre (2009) outlines how the production of space is based and enacts a strategy of the repetitive, in a formal and quantified abstract space negating differences, Harvey (2008), building on this, argues how the values here cultivated are individualistic and property based, in a general neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism.

Either the museum and its wider habitat — the urban landscape — thus, are markedly shaped by the capitalist (and later the neoliberal) ethic of abstraction, homogenization and intense possessive individualism, described by Lefebvre and Harvey. Both authors, however, do not intend to depict this process as the only possible alternative (claim which, on the other hand, will inform late neoliberal politics)[3]. Lefebvre (2009), for instance, argues for the possibility of producing a different city — which he explicitly defines as a socialist space — through two crucial stages in the productive relationship with the urban landscape. This twofold shift — from domination to appropriation, and from exchange value to use value — is constitutive of what Lefebvre (1967), and later Harvey (2008), define as "the right to the city": a collective right to greater democratic control over the production and use of surplus. The issue of use value is here crucial, as it is of particular importance in the connection between the museum and the urban space, and especially in their critical reworkings. Usership, in fact, is a fundamental criterion of critical and post-critical museology (Byrne et al., 2018; Melia, 2022), and the practical museum experimentations stemming from them. But before examining them in detail, and in order to better frame them — and hopefully to do so without falling into the vocabulary and mindset which explain social change as an abrupt change or a disrupting revo-

3. The reference here is to neoliberalism's famous political slogan: "There is no Alternative" (TINA).

lution — I will now turn to the key developments in museum studies that paved the way for this paradigm, both theoretically and practically.

3 A Tale of Museum Redemption: From the Decolonial Museum to the Experimental Institution

Since the early 20th century, the artistic and cultural experience has been embedded in a social and political project aiming to legitimize the then burgeoning capitalist rationality. As the museum served as a bastion of such rationality, it is today a valuable object of analysis to investigate and interpret it. As mentioned above, the modern museum project was grounded in a governmental need to discipline the everyday life in the emerging mass society and to edify individuals through the control of their leisure time. As argued by Duncan and Wallach (1978) and then echoed by Staniszewski (1988) and Mollona (2021), museums were far from being neutral containers of works of art, and they have always had a significant relationship with cultural primacy and the ruling classes. This is clear when looking at the colonial accountability of museums. In this paragraph, I will focus on retracing the latter and its subsequent critical developments in order to analyse how the museum and the museum community have discovered their own non-neutrality, a crucial acknowledgment in respect to contemporary museum change.

During the last two decades, many scholars have begun to question the established narrative of modernism and its marginalization of non-Western art as well as, above all, the typical concealment of this process with the aid of the self-proclaimed objectivity (Bhabha, 1993; Haq, 2015; Harney & Philips, 2019). Indeed, as a product of the Enlightenment epistemology, the canon of art history presented itself as universal, silencing the histories of the non-West and often despoiling them, both materially and symbolically. The fabula of art history, for instance, has as a major turning point the *discovery* of the so-called primitive art, as it was *discovered* by European avant-garde artists and critics who framed it as the product of an underdeveloped, simpler way of life of its creators. Once brought out into the open, it was carefully put through the already typical essentializing tendency and commodifying desire embodied by the museum display. Never been anonymous containers or apolitical enclaves, thus, museums participated trenchantly in this process, equipping it with a scientific paradigm and entitling it through their institutional voice. As they became deeply involved in the project of moulding the national identity, arising as evidence of historical authenticity and legitimacy, they need today to be acknowledged and studied as such. Indeed, this is a crucial concern of the contemporary museum debate, which progressively led to critical and post-critical approaches.

To begin with, such perspectives move from the possibility of mapping out power centres involved in museological production and dissemination, unveiling the coloniality of cultural representation and proper geopolitics of knowledge (Chambers et al., 2014; Brulon Soares & Leschenko, 2018). As a matter of fact, the very same notion of museum was produced in Europe and was then exported along the routes of a top-down globalisation, that was unfolded on a cultural level no less than on the material one. To this regard, indeed, many efforts had been revolved by scholars towards the recognition of the considerable differences scattered worldwide in the definitions of what a museum is (MacDonald, 2006; Watson, 2007), to the extent that, according to some, it is possible to question the possibility of describing the museum through a univocal definition (Brulon Soares, 2009). On this question, however, whether it leads to an answer or a dead-end, lie the foundations of the project to inaugurate a museology as a decolo-

nial social science. This museological approach is dedicated to the exploration of the unsolved issue of cultural imperialism. In doing so, scholars and professionals look at art practices and their institutions not only as territories where remains of colonial history can be found, but also as platforms apt to rearticulate historical connections from specific geopolitical positions (Aikens et al., 2019). The researchers and practitioners of the European confederation of museums, arts organization and universities, L'Internationale,[4] offer a crucial example of such work. First, they investigate a variegated array of case studies in order to detect the patterns of violence and inequality evident in cultural representations; then, they show how these very same narratives could be flipped, using them towards a twofold objective: to contest the traditional art history, creating new ones; to align curatorial, museum and art research with a political and not just an aesthetic agenda.

If, indeed, as I just observed, art institutions — and museums first and foremost — never have been apolitical or *super-partes*, today professionals and scholars worldwide call for their deployment inside the communities and societies they serve. Not by chance, this stands in line with the most recent museum definitions collectively drafted and approved by ICOM, as I have already mentioned. Since August 2022, ICOM defines a museum as

> [...] a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society [...]. Open to public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities [...].[5]

By recollecting museums responsibility and by accounting art institutions not only as privileged lookout points, but also as yards for the productive contestation and the elaboration of constructive alternatives, these studies have paved the way for the critical approaches on which I am focusing. These strands in fact represent the sharp emergence of a new perspective permeating the artworld, which questions its unequal mechanisms and hegemonic structures, both on a macro level (how it is arranged as a system) and a more micro one (the content it produces and the narrative resulting from it) (Doherty, 2004 & 2006; Ray & Raunig, 2007). If, in its first phases, institutional critique has been charged of retreating in a fruitless antagonism and of limiting itself to a contention that shied away from providing alternatives, its current strands are characterized by an affirmative and productive stance. Indeed, they address the creative and positive dimension of instituency (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002) envisioning the production of the institution as a potentially collective and bottom-up process. This allows the assembly of innovative institutional formats apt to break away from the usual monolithic imaginary that includes, for example, schools, political parties and, in our specific case, the modernist museum. This passage is clear when looking at the early expressions of institutional critique which, in fact, proclaimed its aim to destroy the art institution in a clear anarchic and antagonist attitude. As shown by American artist Robert Smithson (1972), these positions conflate in a sheer refusal of the art institution:

> Museums, like asylums and jails have wards and cells — in other words, neutral rooms called "galleries". A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and

4. L'Internationale is a European confederation of museums, arts organizations and universities, founded in 2009. L'Internationale was founded to offer an alternative model to globalizing art institutions that replicate the structures of multinational powers and their centralized distribution of knowledge. https://internationaleonline.org/about/

5. For the complete definition, see: https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/

> becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral [...]. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement (pp. 154–155).

Differently from its previous expressions, contemporary debates of institutional critique and of critical and post-critical museology do not aim to destroy the museum, advocating for the institutional void as the only form of freedom. Rather, by assuming the dynamic nature of institutions, these approaches envision new, different museum formats apt to evade from the White Cube model and to avoid its cultural confinement effect.

Not by chance, this de-confinement of the museum is tied to a renewed role it gained towards the production and the administration of the urban landscape, as well as its daily living. Critical approaches, in fact, have rediscovered the museum as an institution in which the institution making process is one of collective and laboratory nature. Just like the collective reappropriation of processes of urbanization, embedded in the concept of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1967; Harvey, 2008), the crucial passage from the modern museum paradigm to the contemporary, critical forms, entails the reclaiming to make, and use, the museum. The shift from a top-down fabrication and management of space (be it the museum or the city) to a collective, communal, and radically democratic one, along with the shift from the exchange value to the use value, connect the museum and the city from a critical perspective. This shift, in fact, sustains two parallel, perhaps comparable, rights: the right to the city and the right to the museum. In the next section, therefore, I will attempt to explore and interpret this pairing through a transdisciplinary lens.

4 The Right to the Museum as a Right to the City: The Tie Between Critical Museology and Critical Urbanism

The acknowledgment of the ideological grounds on which the modern notion of museum rests on has constituted a starting point for the critical turn in museum studies, triggering a discussion which, moving from this commitment to embrace non-neutrality, goes further, mobilizing the affirmative dimension inherent in critique. To this regard, one could think for example of Frankfurt School's *Ideologiekritik*: the unmasking of the historically specifically myths, reifications, and antinomies that pervade bourgeois forms of knowledge (Brenner, 2012). A project which clearly recalls that involving the museum as a decolonial site.

Even if intrinsically theoretical, however, critique is to be understood as a mean to explore, through theory and towards practice, the possibility of moulding alternatives to the current order: its task, then, is not only to investigate forms of domination and ideological constraints, but — once unmasked these — to "excavate the emancipatory possibilities that are embedded within, yet simultaneously suppressed by, this very system" (Brenner, 2012). Hence, theoretical itineraries opened by institutional critique and critical museology led naturally to the production of experimental models of art institutions, recognized from time to time under different labels, such as Alter Institutions, Slow Institutions, or even Monster Institutions (Moore & Smart, 2015; Petrešin-Bachelez, 2017; Baravalle, 2018). However they may be called, these sites move beyond artistic and curatorial needs and share a common concern towards how the

museum can and should address broader social urgencies. According to L'Internationale contributor and museum professional Kuba Szreder (2019), for example, they testify the attempt to overcome the museum's neutral façade, by embracing its partiality and answering to the demands of taking part in contemporary social and political struggles. The future art institution is thus reconceived as a collective subject that is "artistically charged, theoretically aware, socially useful, democratically accountable and politically placed" (Szreder, 2019). This perspective is irreconcilable with the White Cube's pretence of detachment, and it is, on the contrary, bound to the acknowledgement of the powerful social role held by museums, be it disciplinary — towards the maintenance of the existing social order —, or antagonistic — attempting to disturb it.

As I tried to briefly show in previous paragraphs, through the 19th and the 20th centuries museums used to have a crucial role in defining and disciplining individual and collective experience: in other words, they were conceived, and thus carefully designed, as devices apt to provide a template for, and exert control over, the leisure time of the modern metropolis' inhabitant; and on the idea of museum experience as an utterly capitalist ritual. This entailed the establishment of a close relationship between the museum and the urban space, which has all but vanished. As a matter of fact, it reappears, although in a completely different manner, when looking at the critical art institution. The latter in fact, refuses the claim of aesthetic abstraction or artistic distance, and embraces the need to reflect on issues related to the urban space, such as the processes of gentrification, the corporatization of public soil, or the division of space into centres and peripheries on the basis of specific power balances and relations.

One of the crucial questions addressed by researchers and practitioners of critical museology is the concern of the usership, or in other words, the reconceptualization of museums as spaces to be collectively used, as well as collectively produced. The call to use museums is clearly connected to the call to use urban space, revealing the continuity between two rights that are not only related, but to some extent interdependent: the right to the city and the right to the museum. Together, their emergence signals the dissatisfaction with the mechanisms of individualization and dispossession that modern and contemporary capitalism exerts over public space.

The argument towards the use of the museum, as well as being consistent with the involvement of museums in urban dynamics, as already demonstrated, also shows the connection between critical museology and institutionalism and critical urbanism. This transdisciplinary connection is even more significant, as it corroborates the idea, shared by many contemporary scholars, that today urban studies need to escape their own boundaries, in order to investigate their complex, multifaceted research questions (Brenner et al., 2012). This is also in line with a tendency of contemporary social movement, which today often trespass traditional borders of contestation and imply forms of direct social action that often breach into languages and means of artistic and creative practice (Bosi & Zamponi 2015 & 2022; Sholette, 2017). Critical urbanism approaches, hence, could offer a useful perspective in order to investigate contemporary museums' experimentations, emphasizing their crucial, while often neglected, relationship with practices and processes of citizenship. On the other hand, to investigate museums in their renewed critical role can offer valuable insights towards contemporary dynamics of space reclamation and, more broadly, social contestation.

For the sake of my analysis, critical urban theory could be framed as a strive to uncover, and investigate, the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space. The latter, therefore, is denaturalized and examined as the outcome of historically specific of social, political and economic power. Significantly, this denaturaliza-

tion recalls that investing museums in some strands of research, such as the aforementioned decolonial approaches. Another common trait is the affirmative dimension shared by critical museology and critical urbanism that, as a matter of fact, is inherent of the very same notion of critique from which they both stem. In the case of critical urbanism, this materializes into an effort to acknowledge urban questions as historically and politically mediated, and thus socially remediable. It thus involves the rejection of the inevitable reproduction of given urban formations, calling for the need to advance theoretical arguments suitable to forge and sustain alternative forms of urbanism. Consistently with the reflexive attitude of critique, critical urbanism also entails the consideration of some methodologically challenges, in light of the increasement and the diversification of urbanization processes. As argued by Brenner (2012), in fact,

> Urbanization no longer refers simply to the expansion of the "great towns" of industrial capitalism, to the sprawling metropolitan production centres, suburban settlement grids and regional infrastructural configurations of Fordist-Keynesian capitalism, or to the anticipated linear expansion of city-based human populations in the world's "mega-cities". Instead, as Lefebvre (2003, 1970) anticipated nearly four decades ago, this process now increasingly unfolds through the uneven stretching of an "urban fabric", composed of diverse types of investment patterns, settlement spaces, land use matrices, and infrastructural networks, across the entire world economy (pp. 20–21).

Thus, capitalist urbanization needs to be studied with different and more varied epistemological and empirical resources, which are suitable to grasp the porosity and the multidimensionality of urban processes. As the urban can no longer be seen as a distinct category, but is instead a general global condition, the questions regarding urban spaces organization and usage — from the enclosure of public or common spaces to the regulation of political and social life — are to be integrated in much wider studies.

This process is not very different from one occurring in the art and museum field, where scientific community's endeavours are tied both to issues specific to museum studies' legacy and questions of broader political and social interest. Among those, stands an array of topics linked to contemporary urbanization and urban social practices. Experimental art institutions, which are the practical result of such theoretical efforts, become thus proper tools towards the enactment of what geographer David Harvey (2008) defines as the right to the city. Described as "the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves" the right to the city is framed not only as the individual liberty to access and use urban resources but, rather, as the power to change ourselves by changing our city (Harvey, 2008). According to Harvey, the right to the city is today devoured by the one and only right admitted by neoliberalism, that of private property, which has as its principal concern to reduce the space of public realm and its institutions. Hence, to reclaim the museum as a public space to be collectively used — in other words, to reclaim a right to the museum — is part of reclaiming the right to the city.

This theoretical encounter between critical museology and critical urbanism has many empirical unfoldings, as the existence of the idea of creative activism suggests (Reed, 2019). On the other hand, recent social movements studies — and more specifically those investigating direct social action as a form of action that focuses upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself, instead of claiming something from the state or other power holders — argue how political and social contestation is today expanding both in its actors and its means. In this diversification it is significant the increasing involvement of artists and art institutions (Deriu & Putini, 2012).

This consideration is grounded in the observation of several case studies. While it is impossible to provide in this context an exhaustive account of such cases, in order to offer an empirical counterpart of the discussion developed until now, I will now consider two of them: the project of the Museum of Arte Útil, for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven; and Las Agencias, by Museu d'art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

The Museum of Arte Útil, initiated in 2013 by artist Tania Bruguera in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum, the Eindhoven Museum for Contemporary Art, is an attempt to put to the test art's social function and, more specifically, to claim its use value. It draws upon the idea of Arte Útil, i.e. the idea of art as a tool or device to be used within society in order to respond to current urgencies (Byrne & Saviotti, 2022). The Museum of Arte Útil, hence, deployed an archive of art projects holding art as a tactic to produce social change, reassembling different artworks and creative practices in a repertoire to be tapped into by visitors. Reconceptualizing art as a tool for tangible intervention, which is clearly a refusal of the modernist stance of artistic autonomy and abstraction — the museum is rethought as a "social power plant",[6] a site of relations, social exchange and action, where art and history stand as resources to imagine new forms of civic life. The question addressed by the Arte Útil project regards in fact how citizens can use museum. Thus, it replaces spectatorship with usership, individual experience with collective action and it re-establishes aesthetics as a system of transformation (Estupiñan & Saviotti, 2023) — as opposed to a space of contemplation. In this way, it gives to the museum a renewed role inside the city it inhabits and, above all, towards its citizens who, it is worth to stress it again, are not its disciples, as in the early modern museum, or its consumers, as in the late one, but instead its users.

The second example, Las Agencias,[7] is a project carried out at MACBA with artist Jordi Claramonte and curator Jorge Ribalta. The project, which took place in Barcelona in 2001, when the city hosted the celebration of the summit of the World Bank, comprised a series of workshop intertwining creative practice and activism, in the attempt to build a complicity between art and social movements (Ribalta, 2004). Thus, the museum was used as a linguistic, or creative, resource for activists, as well as a shelter (both materially and metaphorically). Moreover, this dialogue served as an exercise of self-critique for the museum, challenging its hierarchies, its power structures and its entanglement with wider social issues: symptomatically, many of such issues were of urban nature, such as those regarding the urban speculation in the neighborhood hosting the museum (the Raval) and the museum itself as both an output and an input of gentrification processes. Despite Las Agencias being an object of dispute and having sparked various controversies, it is a clear example of the re-functionalization of the museum as an urban space.

When elaborating the right to the city, Harvey described a relational crisis, a sort of fracture at the core of the contemporary everyday experience. In such a context — characterized by alienation, isolation and individualism — the experimental institutionalism rediscovers art institutions as an arena of communality, dialogue and care (Melia, 2022). Furthermore, envisioning the art museum as a social space inside the city means to use it as space to enjoy the city as a common good, countering the privatization and corporatization processes which today are sweeping contemporary cities. In this way, it is advanced as a site from which to discuss, reinvent and reclaim the right to the city.

6. For more information on the Arte Útil Movement: https://arte-util.org/

7. More on Las Agencias can be found in MACBA's online archive: https://www.macba.cat/en/actor/las-agencias-entitat/

5 Conclusion

Often today art museums are considered and treated in the guise of businesses (Camarero et al., 2011) or even as proper urban brands (Caldwell, 2000). Evidently, this is one of the many expressions of that neoliberal urban culture represented, for example, by the idea of the creative city (Florida, 2005). This theory, moving from the understanding of the creative sector as a pillar of the global market, argues for the existence of a type of human capital (the creative individual) and of a category of city (the creative centre) that benefit economically and symbolically from the valorisation of art and culture. In this play, the museum, being both a metropolitan landmark and a lead actor in the public consumption of art (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005), evidently performs a key part, not only in the renewal of material spaces, but also in that of daily life practices, a domain in which it achieves moments of theatricalization and packaging and repackaging of dominant viewpoints (Mathews, 2010). Emblematic in this regard is the case of the Guggenheim Museum, which, for example, has participated decisively in the transition of a city like Bilbao from an industrial to a post-industrial centre, acting as a node for a transformation of the city's material and symbolic economy. Not coincidentally, that of the Guggenheim Museum is a global brand that links cities such as Bilbao and Venice to New York and Abu Dhabi, and has had, in all contexts, important impacts that stress the tie between issues such as gentrification with cultural consumption.

On the other hand, however, critical museology's theoretical endeavours and empirical experimentations rethink the museum in light of a different idea of and project for the city, which stems from social movements practices and critical urbanism discussions. From this angle, museums, while sometimes being strategic sites functional to the imperatives and routines of neoliberalism can, at the same time, and due to this very same unquestionable urban role of art institutions, be recovered as arenas from which to contest such routines — it is worth to notice that the same, as many authors argue, is true for urban context more generally (Brenner, 2012; Mayer, 2012). Once again, and not by chance, the case of the Guggenheim Museum is paradigmatic: the conditions of the construction workers in Abu Dhabi, in fact, have been the subject of a protest that kicked off an entire movement, giving rise to the so-called Gulf Labour Coalition,[8] a coalition of international artists which was born to ensure that migrant worker rights are protected during the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, and which then engaged in more broader political and social challenges.

In this paper, I tried to investigate the urban role of the museum, either in its narrative, semantic dimension and on a more practical level. While at the dawn of Western modernity it rested on the claim of artistic and cultural legitimation in order to regulate the social conduct of the then arising metropolitan mass, it later deployed the powerful concept of aesthetic detachment in order to mask its behavioural and ideological endeavours. The museum's centrality in the life of the city, therefore, has far from waned over time, from its early days as a normative agent of the metropolitan self leisure time (Vergo, 1989; Bennett 1995), to its rise as a temple of late 20th century capitalist ideology (Duncan & Wallach, 1978; Mollona, 2021). While the engagement of the museum with the city is not to be questioned, its entanglement with the dominant power and its commitment to the constituted order have been subverted in the experimental institution — as I indeed tried to interpret focusing on this renewed relationship with the urban context. These approaches, which are theoretically grounded and have as well many practical examples, have been enabled by a radical revision of the museum's past, mostly in the deconstruction of its positivist, nationalist and colonialist stances (Chambers et al., 2014;

8. For more information about the Gulf Labour Coalition: https://gulflabour.org/

Brulon Soares & Leschenko, 2018; Brulon Soares, 2020), which I have commented, but also in the ecological and feminist approaches (Haraway, 1988; Werkmeister, 2016; Aksoy et al., 2021) — which I have necessarily omitted for reasons of scope and focus.

What I tried to outline is a critical, self-reflexive work, undertaken by the museum, which is not an attempt to be absolved, as it stems first and foremost from the acknowledgement of non-neutrality. Nor it is a tautological effort, as it implies an assumption of responsibility to be to be fulfilled through practical planning and experimental attitudes. Moving from its unbreakable tie with the urban context, and its undeniable role in the administration of urban spaces and practices, thus, this trajectory of museum's work implies a reconceptualization both of the city and of the museum itself: while the latter is not anymore relegated to abstract and edulcorated aesthetic enjoyment, the former may be reclaimed from different perspectives and with various means. Ultimately, the two can be reconnected as objects of specular rights for citizens: the right to design them, inhabit them, and use them on a daily basis.

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