



The Stanisław Lorentz Courtyard of the National Museum in Warsaw.

PHOTO: BURGERERSF/CC

# TRAUMATIC CONTEMPORANEITY

## REFLECTIONS ON PIOTR PIOTROWSKI'S CRITICAL MUSEOGRAPHY

by **Dan Karlholm**

### abstract

This essay analyses two texts by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015) articulating theoretical stances towards art museography. Reflecting on how they deal with psychological as well as openly political issues, I interpret and assess their joint contribution to the broader interdisciplinary field of (critical) museography. The texts are “New Museums in New Europe” and “Making the National Museum Critical”. Together the texts developed Piotrowski’s concept of “the critical museum” as a way of dealing with the challenges of running an old national art museum based on masterpieces while also striving to engage with pressing contemporary issues, which is a prerequisite for critical intervention.

**KEYWORDS:** Piotr Piotrowski, the critical museum, museography, art museum, traumaphobia, traumaphilia, post-communism.

**T**heoretical support for large segments of current avant-garde research in art history in general, and research on East European art history in particular, derives from Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015).<sup>1</sup>

Notable among his many books and publications are *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989* (in Polish 2005, in English 2009) and *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (published as *Agoraphilia – Sztuka I demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie* in Polish 2010, in English 2012).<sup>2</sup> Piotrowski’s most widely known and influential contribution to art historiography is his proposal of a paradigm shift towards what he terms “horizontal art history” in contradistinction to prevailing models, which he argues are vertical, i.e. hierarchical, and by implication, Western. His ambition was to depart from art histories of the Western (West European and American) kind, privileging the West and a Western concept of

art, often veiled as universal, which inevitably leaves Central and Eastern Europe, and the rest of the world, outside the orbit of scholarly attention. The center-periphery binary is at the center; so to speak, of this idea of promoting a horizontal approach to art history, one also in line with “critical art geography” and “alter-globalist art history”.<sup>3</sup> These ideas of Piotrowski’s were first formulated in response to exhibitions in East-Central Europe.<sup>4</sup> Not least the exhibition *Europa, Europa* (1994), strongly criticized by Piotrowski, became a starting point for his critical suggestion to horizontalize art history.<sup>5</sup> His contributions to museography, on new post-communist museums and “the critical museum”, are additional responses to the situation.

In this essay, I will look at two texts by Piotrowski that articulate theoretical stances towards art museography: one devoted to issues of trauma management, contemporaneity and identity, and the other presenting a methodological tactic to deflect the power of the art-historical museum piece in critical and democratic ways. Reflecting on how the texts deal with psychological as well as openly political issues, I will interpret and assess their joint contribution to the broader interdisciplinary field of (critical) museography. The more widely used label is museology, which is about practices of the museum branch, but when the analysis is of a more theoretical nature and/or regards how museums are taken to write or perform history, museography is arguably a preferable term.<sup>6</sup> The texts are “New Museums in New Europe”<sup>7</sup> and “Making the National Museum Critical”.<sup>8</sup> The first text discusses four new or newly re-furbished museums in a culture in Eastern Europe characterized since 1989 as “post-traumatic” (203).<sup>9</sup> These museums are contextualized both in

relation to the Western museum boom of the same years, and to the new museums’ recent history, where sometimes the very architecture and site of these institutions renders trauma tangible. The second text is a case-study based on experience and inside knowledge, from the short period when the author directed and together with Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius oversaw the Warsaw National Museum of Art (2009–2010). Together they developed Piotrowski’s concept of “the critical museum” as a way of dealing with the challenges of running an old national art museum based on masterpieces while also striving to engage with pressing contemporary issues.<sup>10</sup>

### Traumatic past?

Before presenting any museums anywhere, the text “New Museums in New Europe” begins by establishing “two reference points”, the first on the nature of the past, and the second on the role for art within such a past. According to the first reference, it is alleged that “the past always has a traumatic character” (202), although, the author cautions, this use of the word ‘trauma’ is not strictly psychoanalytical, but more colloquial. While the 20<sup>th</sup>

century has certainly been fertile soil for traumatic courses of events, it is a little curious to ascribe to the past as such the character of trauma. Presumably, the past is seen as a trauma-generating component, although this is also quickly qualified: the past “almost always” contains hardships the effects of which must be dealt with in the present. To grasp the statement that the past is (almost) always traumatic, we may have to understand “the past” here as affiliated with the reality of trauma, in the sense that both of these phenomena are retro-actively constructed (which is in line with psychoanalysis, generally speaking, according to which trauma is seen as a deferred (*nachträglich*) phenomenon in time, a temporal drag disturbing the subject today). While trauma theory is a multifaceted discipline today, and psychoanalysis, elaborated by Sigmund Freud, only a part of the complex, this is what Piotrowski loosely refers to.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, the very concept of the past is analogous to the concept of trauma by having its root in the bygone “past” while referring to a lingering or present situation. This means that *the past* is a present summary of what has happened (regardless of whether we include everything that has ever happened or just some selection fit for history writing), just as trauma (insofar as there is one) is like a wound or scar from a previous event that does not heal and continues to haunt the subject in the present.<sup>12</sup>

The reference, in colloquial speech or by Piotrowski in this text, to a “traumatic past” (202) seems to refer to a bygone past which was already “traumatic” in character, but trauma is better understood as neither a cause nor a mere result, but what sociologist Piotr Sztopka designates as a “traumatic sequence”.<sup>13</sup> Sztopka further refers to bygone events, which are virtually destined to give rise to trauma in the subjects exposed to them, as “traumatogenic”.<sup>14</sup> The key here is that there are always two temporal moments or scenes to distinguish a trauma referring to them both. The expression “post-traumatic”, coined in 1980 and referenced here, is thus literally tautological, since trauma always already implies or involves a delayed state after or “post” some previous event.<sup>14</sup> No event is essentially traumatic, only potentially so. Both keywords – trauma and the past – belong with our relative contemporaneity vis-à-vis a time that has passed. Piotrowski contends that “in looking backwards we are addressing a recollection of trauma or approaching the issue from a somewhat different perspective, a traumatization of memory”. But we can only recollect trauma once we are no longer traumatized, otherwise this phrase becomes tautological too: recollection and trauma are equally contemporary, both erupting within the subject at a distance from the events themselves. Trauma is a form of recollection, although not always a conscious one.<sup>15</sup> For Freud, however, trauma hinges not on memory but on compulsive repetition, where the trauma-generative experience is relived or re-experienced in dreams, rather than remembered:

I am not aware [...] that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it. In general, the patient “is obliged to repress the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past.”<sup>16</sup>

### Fear or love?

The second reference point concerns how art can assist in processing trauma within “cultural memory” (202).<sup>17</sup> While both trauma and memory are deeply individualized phenomena, these concepts have been extended for quite some time to include collective and cultural experiences, which is how Piotrowski uses them.<sup>18</sup> Trauma not only serves the author to interpret the museum culture of “New Europe”, i.e. after 1989 or 1991, a further distinction between two opposite reactions to (potentially) traumatic events is made: one negative (*traumaphobia*, literally a fear of trauma) and the other positive (*traumaphilia*, literally a love of trauma). The latter term derives from Roger Luckhurst, who picked it up from Walter Benjamin, and is the most unconventional of the two.<sup>19</sup> How could something as troublesome and potentially devastating as trauma be embraced affirmatively, in terms of joy or love? It is explained that both terms and both syndromes depart from a “negative legacy” but deal with this differently. The conceptual pair is the tool for the following analysis of the four museums, where some of these could be read as conforming to the first and others to the second form of response.

Having concluded that “museums as institutions thrive in the globalized world”, Piotrowski laments that this development has largely “bypassed Eastern Europe”. Given the allegedly “low interest in post-communist countries in art museums” (204), it is easy to appreciate the ensuing explanation:

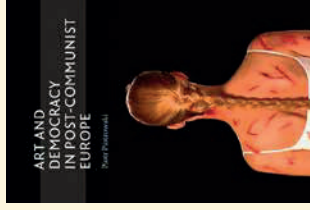
In Eastern Europe the neo-liberal cult of money and faith in self-regulation of the markets has created barriers for support of cultural projects, especially public ones. (205)

Nevertheless, new museums were erected, although the examples included only opened in the 2000s, and one was still under construction. The first comparison concerns the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) in Bucharest, housed since 2004 in a small part of the massive People’s Palace built by Ceausescu in the 1980s, and the Museum of Art (KUMU) in Tallinn, inaugurated in 2009, without connections to a difficult heritage site, as well as the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, housed in the former Museum of Revolution erected in the Soviet period.

The argument on horizontal art history is here interestingly transferred to a differentiating *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within and between the former East European countries. The MNAC



Piotr Piotrowski.



Book cover from 2012.



Book cover from 2015.



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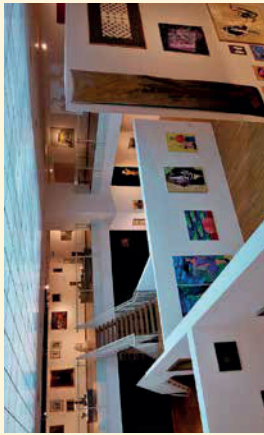


PHOTO MNAC

in Bucharest as a literal part of the past (by being incorporated architecturally in the People's Palace) was supposedly determined to avoid all references to the past and aim only for the future (of global contemporary art).<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the first exhibition at KUMU, a brand new museum complex on relatively neutral ground, chose to confront the past head on through the curator Elia Komisarov's design for the permanent exhibition, including socialist realist art from the period of occupation along with older art and post-Soviet art.<sup>21</sup> The first is an example of traumaphobia, and the other of traumaphilia, in Piotrowski's analysis. We could of course discuss whether the choice of MNAC was really generated by a kind of "fear" of the past, and not by a pragmatic sense of no longer having or wanting to dwell on the past instead of actively departing from it, finally. Or whether KUMU's choice was really one of love or "joy", when they managed to present socialist realist art, as in many respects decent art, not always propaganda kitsch, to thereby face the facts of a troubling legacy, i.e. as "a necessary historical reference" (213). Also, although "[n]either the location nor the architecture of KUMU relates in any way to the communist past" (212), is this – the conscious decision to erect a new building in a beautiful, slightly remote park – not to be counted, too, as a way of relating to or at least responding to the communist past? Furthermore, regarding the MNAC in Bucharest, the author acknowledges that the first exhibition of this museum, which operates more like a temporary art space, did confront its troubling past and "had nothing to do with traumaphobia". But the exhibition program that followed is accused of traumaphobia due to it not relating at all to the "post-communist condition", thus abandoning "the critical perspective demonstrated in such a promising way by the inauguration show" (210).

### Critical or not?

Does MNAC, then, by choosing to work on global contemporary art now and for the future, really reveal "its flight from history and its trauma (unwilling) the abnegation of a critical attitude towards the past" (210)? It had one exhibition, its first, where the "critical" criteria were met, according to the author, but that is clearly not enough to face up to its traumatic history. We seem to

be stuck with a slightly absurd choice, then: either an institution is repressing its past, refusing, supposedly, to deal with it, or it remains faithful to the seemingly insatiable imperatives of critical processing. Repression or repetition is not much of a choice, however. Aiming for a restart may sound naïve, but perhaps it is also constructive and "creative".<sup>22</sup> Perhaps another attitude is warranted in this analysis, one which has been discussed in terms of the "limits of critique" by Rita Felski:

Critique is a remarkably contagious and charismatic idea, drawing everything into its field of force, patrolling the boundaries of what counts as serious thought. It is virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo. Drawing a sense of philosophical weightiness from its proximity to the tradition of Kant and Marx, it also retains a cutting-edge sensibility, retooling itself to fit the needs and demands of new fields. For many scholars in the humanities it is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing. Critique, as I've noted, just is the exercise of thoughtful intelligence and independence of mind. To refuse critique, by the same token, is to sink into the mire of complacency, credibility and conservatism. Who would want to be associated with the bad smell of the uncritical?

Felski also points to what she terms a "strong contextualism" in approaches, such as Piotrowski's, where "texts are scanned for signs of sociohistorical fractures and traumas that they studiously suppress".<sup>23</sup> The contextualism at play here comes close to an equally strong, not say forbidding, historicism, according to which institutions are compelled to stay faithful to, not to say repeat, their unique past. The paradox is of course that the point of psychoanalysis is to ultimately work through, successfully mourn or somehow overcome the disturbances from the past to be able to leave them behind.

To play the devil's advocate, KUMU's move, for example, could be seen as a tactical decision to refrain from "critique", in the sense of both critical judgement and conversation-stopping

"abnegation", and of opting, instead, for full "unconcealment", to paraphrase Martin Heidegger, regardless of present aesthetic preferences and museographic conventions. While the term "critical" has been the object of reexamination in recent years, Piotrowski certainly has a point by insisting, as he has elsewhere, that "[b]eing critical is an obligation for every intellectual, not just for scholars, art historians, and artists. No, we all have to think critically. Democracy is not a gift, it is not a given, we have to fight for this every day because there are always enemies. Critical ways of thinking can be used to disarm those who are against democracy."<sup>24</sup> The question is, of course, whether the intensity contemporary (and future-oriented) fight for sustainable democracy must be forever linked to its traumatic past, or to the essentially re-active and negative mode of critique, to which I will return when discussing the next text.

Included in this analysis is a reference to the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha on mimicry, which is, in my interpretation, a misunderstanding, since it is indeed a critical strategy. By deliberately adopting – mimicking – the modes or mores of the colonizer, one can create a critical difference, which enables forms of resistance to colonial discourse. Piotrowski's allegation of self-colonialization fails to consider that "the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing."<sup>25</sup> The MNAC in Bucharest, moreover, is not only accused of "self-colonization" (Kloesse), as a kind of mimicry, but also of derailing its "local character".<sup>26</sup>

The latter allegation, again, seems to imply that institutions should remain true to their roots, whether they like it or not, and stay tied to their ethnic/historical/political origins, that is, never to opt out of it or aspire to form a new identity. Hans Belting is quoted as saying that "all museums are local", which is a bit like saying that all humans are individuals or from some specific place.<sup>27</sup> The point of the observation may be to imply that no museums are "global", to follow this jaded polarity. Local is actually a good general term with which to denote a specific (non-general) place, whereas global is a general concept used to denote a sweeping inter-connectedness of world-encompassing dimensions, which reminds us of the saying that the whole is always a lie. Both terms are descriptive, but they are used normatively about concrete phenomena. The MNAC is faulted for its "policy of adopting a certain attitude of mimicry and [harboring an] uncritical desire to inscribe itself into a more imagined than real world" (211).<sup>28</sup> But if we cannot even imagine a new art world (in "New Europe"), nor promote imagination in place of a "real", still West-centered or allegedly "global" art world, or what Jacques Lacan termed The Real (basically trauma), we are arguably in bigger trouble.<sup>29</sup>

The KUMU, by contrast, was determined to seriously "work through" (212) trauma not by hiding their troubling past, or trying to forget it, but instead by exposing it in order, supposedly, to relieve itself of the specters of the past.<sup>30</sup> The case of The

National Art Gallery in Vilnius is said to similarly work through the burden of the past, although its chief curator Lolita Jablon-skienė is mildly criticized for choosing to be "pragmatic rather than ideological", whereas the author as a historian argues that the context of the museum, with its Soviet heritage, "cannot be neutral on the deeper semantic level" (215). The site and the building (however reconstructed) are by no means neutral, but the decision to "ignore" this circumstance is not neutral either (or a case of ignorance). In this museum too, as in the KUMU, art from the Soviet period is integrated into the permanent display, although not without frictions.<sup>31</sup> Being pragmatic here, rather than ideological (a timid word), could amount to acknowledging the heritage and still proceeding (pragmatically) in order not to remain in the past or feel obliged to perpetually reiterate its burdensome character.

In Warsaw, we learn, things are "much more complicated". At the time of writing, the Museum of Modern Art was still under construction. The statement that the "nature of the dialectic relationship between traumaphobia and traumaphilia, which in Poland is simply not as obvious as in the other countries" (216), may be correct, but this is not just the author's country of origin, but a place where he has been involved in directing the national art museum, which means that his bias on this point is not acknowledged. Interestingly, the new building is described as circumscribed by its Soviet environment in Parade Square featuring the Soviet-era Palace of Science and Culture and adjacent Stalin-period housing, but in ways that did not challenge any of this:

In historic terms, [the winner Christian] Kerez's project represents neither disavowal, nor an effort to address the trauma. It neither rejects nor wishes to repeat the negative legacy. Instead it functions in terms of coexistence, as a certain correspondence between the present and the past. (217)<sup>32</sup>

This sounds, indeed, like a smart solution, like deciding to (i.e. remembering to) forget. One reason, of course, not to engage "the trauma" or "the negative legacy", as hinted at above, is that in Poland, Socialist realism ceased to be imposed in 1956, giving a comparable amount of freedom of expression, notwithstanding that a velvet prison is also a prison.<sup>33</sup> In terms of the traumaphilia/traumaphobia model, the Warsaw case is presented as an exception to this binary choice, possibly as a kind of synthesis. The quoted paragraph also connects with horizontality understood as a certain kind of neutrality or short-circuit of options. However this is put, we obviously do not have to choose, then, between forgetting or remembering, denying or embracing, critically confronting or affirming. Museums can very well function "in terms of coexistence" regarding these alternatives, whereby present and past can meet and correspond, which is

## "BY DELIBERATELY ADOPTING – MIMICKING – THE MODES OR MORES OF THE COLONIZER, ONE CAN CREATE A CRITICAL DIFFERENCE."

one fruitful way of understanding contemporaneity with respect to art.<sup>24</sup> The mission of the good museum, formulated in straightforward terms, also arrives at a kind of co-existence between the local and the global:

[...] museums, in particular (though not exclusively) museums of modern/contemporary art, could potentially function as political forums, places where the contemporary condition, whether defined as global, post-colonial or post-communist, could be debated. They could play this role precisely because they span the distance between locality and globality. (212)

The idea that museums of art may constitute a forum for political debate has a relatively long pedigree in the West, going back at least to the 1960s, when Pontus Hultén suggested it for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris,<sup>25</sup> but in a museum culture stamped for decades by Socialist/Communist dictatorships, the question is of course of a different weight. An important link is established here between this essay and the following one on “the critical museum”.

### The critical museum

In the essay “Making the National Museum Critical”, Piotrowski draws on his experience of directing the Warsaw National Museum and the collaborations with his co-curator and later co-editor Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius. The reader is invited to follow the journey from the initial offer Piotrowski received in 2009 to direct the museum, to how he, and the two of them, chose to go about it, leading to his premature resignation only a year later. According to the author, to begin with, as:

[...] the museum was unable to compete with the world's largest museums in terms of its number of ‘masterpieces’, the only possibility was to propose an original conception of the museum institution, which would not be reduced to the reproduction of existing western models, but – in contrast – would derive its strength from the specificity of its position on the margins of Europe, challenging and expanding the canon of world cultural heritage. Thus, [...] our aim was to turn the museum into a critical agent within the public sphere, an institution capable of taking a stance on the key issues in Polish or East European societies, an active actor in a process of developing democracy. (137)

What is immediately revealed here is a different notion of critical/critique, compared to the one used in the former essay. No longer is this keyword employed to process a traumatic past, but used, instead, as a “critical agent” for the public to develop democracy in a yet incompletely democratized Poland. The for-

mer sense was heavily burdened by the past, whereas this one smacks rather optimistically of the future.

The explicit justification for the curator's choice to turn the museum into an agent for democracy is here of course only that it had so few masterpieces, compared to the largest museums in the world, forcing the curators to propose something new. The question, however, is hardly the number of masterpieces but what is being done with them. Before discussing the critical museum concept, a historical background is provided. While this museum is, indeed, an art gallery, despite its name (analogous to the Stockholm Nationalmuseum), the curators' aim was to avoid maintaining this institution as an old-fashioned temple of art (and only art) as well as resisting the pressures of neo-liberal policies to attain as large a number of visitors as possible, i.e. treating the museum as part of the culture industry. Instead, the goal was to open the museum toward society and seize on urgent issues of the day, again creating an arena for political debate, broadly conceived. This brave new order is quickly brought down to earth with the following surprisingly pragmatic announcement:

**The museums located on the margins of artistic geography are much more likely to become the avant-garde, since they are provoked to adopt alternative subversive strategies because of their own weaknesses. They cannot just open the door and wait, but must come up with a new vision of the museum. In Warsaw, the idea of the critical museum was such a vision. (139)**

Compared to the Louvre, the Warsaw Museum may be relatively weak and marginal (as the Stockholm Nationalmuseum may also be), but why compare them at all? In Poland, this museum of the capital and largest city is a central or “leading” one, indeed “a full-blown Universal Survey Museum” established as early as 1862 (138), but Piotrowski always seeks, it seems, to secure the margin or periphery from which an underdog avant-garde strategy appears as the appropriate response. The above measures, while understandable, however, come close to justifying, no doubt unintentionally, the avant-garde makeover as a market strategy to cover up weaknesses and to respond to the ever-present need to advertise novelties. What was needed, in more concrete terms, was allegedly “a new policy of display” for the permanent as well as temporary galleries. Why was this needed? To “attract the public” or gain more visitors...

The strategy, called “interventions” here, familiar from other museums of art in the West, to which this museum is consistently compared, was to juxtapose artworks from historical periods with contemporary ones, and vice versa, as “an invitation to consider what a museum exhibition is, how art history is constructed, how the work of art is placed in the standard historical narrative, and how it can be perceived in terms other than his-



The National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.

follows and although the concept is not used, the idea testifies to a heterochronic or anachronic sensibility, where artworks are liberated from their initial contexts to resonate in other temporal environments, which could be seen as a critical practice, destined to upset the linear and implicitly progressive canon of national art history.<sup>26</sup> To challenge the prevailing canon by “expanding” it, as described in the quotation above, is one way of proceeding, which has to steer carefully clear of challenging the canon or canonicity itself, in order not to deflate the value of masterpieces as such.<sup>27</sup> While the concept of Interventions may have been “a simple method”, it did shake up the linear basis of the museum of art, thus forcing the museum to critique its own art historical premises as well as its founding authority or power position. The strategy emphasized that every exhibition in a museum intervenes in a sense into the received orders and established modes of thought, and that they never obey some historical necessity but are chosen deliberately.

### Museums and democracy

Piotrowski has elsewhere referenced Jean-Marc Poinssot who alleged that “to organize an exhibition is to write the history of art”.<sup>28</sup> How is this practical form of museography compatible with the idea of museums establishing critical public forums for supporting democracy? Can one write history and simultaneously create democratic fora? How does the authoritative museum voice resonate with the public's multitude of opinions? Piotrowski refers to Poinssot claim that the overall idea was to “rearrange the whole permanent display”:

We believed that the permanent galleries of the museum should be re-hung according to a general rethinking of its holdings in terms of a discussion with the European art history canon. Besides, to face international competition, primarily in Europe, the museum would also have to develop a new and original formula for its displays. Such a new formula would have to take into account the existing artistic geography, as well as the general assumption that the canon of European art has been shaped by artistic centers in relation to the idea of the masterpiece. (141)



KUMU, Tallinn.

It is clear that creating a political forum to develop democracy was not the only goal here, but rethinking the canon of (Western) European art history as well, which could of course be symbolically associated with democracy as a value, at least as was enforced (followed by traumatizing terror) through the French revolution. The point about rethinking the canon was particularly forwarded by Murawska-Muthesius, who argued, in Piotrowski's words, that masterpieces are constructed by museums and academic art history.<sup>29</sup> Canons as well as the concept of masterpiece, however, have a relative usage, applicable in the referenced “margins” of the art world, as well as the “centers”, i.e. denoting the best within any given order of visual artefacts. The important thing is not to deconstruct, “criticize” or deny the power of the masterpiece, according to the authors, but rather to deflect it, and turn it around critically, which is an interesting strategy. After recounting two successful exhibitions – *Mediators* and *Arts Homo Erotica* – it is concluded that “the museum and the critical function of the artwork” need not be contradictory, which is generally assumed, according to Piotrowski.<sup>30</sup>

**Instead “the artwork can serve a critical role precisely because of its museum status. The critical status of the art object does not lead to its ‘de-musealization’, rather it is critical because of its ‘musealization’.” (146)**

The precondition, it seems, for museum objects to play a critical role in society is that their status or traditional role as prestigious museum artefacts is maintained but used in such a way by the museum apparatus itself that they can respond to critical demands.<sup>31</sup> In the pathbreaking *Arts Homo Erotica*, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz, works from the collection, such as 19th-century paintings of mythological subjects, were brushed up against contemporary art and thematic sections informed by queer politics. This too may look like a rather “simple method”, but it files in the face of ages of museum critique, including the more recent “institutional critique” alluded to in the title of this anthology, which follows Quattrone de Quincly in the early 19th century all the way to Theodor Adorno et al. in the latter part of the 20th century, according to which museums are themselves antithetical to critique since they kill and bury those very objects



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The precondition, it seems, for museum objects to play a critical role in society is that their status or traditional role as prestigious museum artefacts is maintained but used in such a way by the museum apparatus itself that they can respond to critical demands.<sup>31</sup> In the pathbreaking *Arts Homo Erotica*, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz, works from the collection, such as 19th-century paintings of mythological subjects, were brushed up against contemporary art and thematic sections informed by queer politics. This too may look like a rather “simple method”, but it files in the face of ages of museum critique, including the more recent “institutional critique” alluded to in the title of this anthology, which follows Quattrone de Quincly in the early 19th century all the way to Theodor Adorno et al. in the latter part of the 20th century, according to which museums are themselves antithetical to critique since they kill and bury those very objects

through which such a critique could be mounted – the artworks turned into museum exhibits.<sup>22</sup> It turns out then, that “the critical museum” is critical of generations of Western style museum critique, which has failed to understand how museums could in fact employ – rather than symbolically destroy – its richest resources critically. It is not an issue of what you display, but how you do it, and for what purposes. It is neither an abnegation of current criticality nor of the bygone past; rather, literally a post-traumatic strategy in the sense of a reinvention of tradition (partly traumatic) or of amassing concrete and highly valued bits of the past as the contemporary building blocks of the (hopefully democratic) future.

The critical museum concept is based upon an enforced, not “democratically” lessened, power position of the museum/curator. Its reliance upon strong statements and directives of the curators may conflict with the general idea of democratic debate, i.e. among people whose only qualification is to have no qualification, whose entitlement to govern and be governed is to lack such entitlement, to draw on the argument on democracy from Jacques Rancière.<sup>23</sup> The “critical” decision to turn renowned works of art into agents of democracy is not itself democratic, but an elitist one, as it has to be. But if critique and democracy are sometimes an asymmetrical partnership, what about trauma and (contemporary) history in museums and (contemporary) art? Both must be understood in relation to the global and the local as well, since museums, again, are said to “span the distance between locality and globality” (212).

The constant comparison with the West, the global, the central and the (West) European museums with real museum practice in the author’s otherwise continuous stress on acknowledging the local, which does

sound reasonable in order to create a political forum in a museum of art, but not so much when it comes to writing (art) history, perhaps (unless its most local version). In relational terms, the biggest museum of art in Poland is not “marginal”, as Piotrowski has it, except in non-local terms, i.e. when these terms are not adequately understood as a relationship of “co-existence” – as earlier attributed to the “traumatic past” and the recovering present. Piotrowski interestingly also suggests that while Poland had no trauma from communism on a par with Romania or the occupied Baltic states, the Poles could be seen as traumatized in the aftermath of the resolution of the Soviet Union by “the neoliberal policies of the 1990s” (220). From this would follow that Romania and the Baltic states were doubly traumatized, since also prey to these winds of aggressive capitalist speculation and societal change following the long period of Soviet oppression. Each has its own local issues to depart from. In Poland and in Warsaw the National Museum is central *and* local, while Western museums are marginal or even peripheral in comparison. It you want to come to grips with trauma, difficult heritage, current politics, to debate and develop “unfulfilled” democracy, it is

clearly irrelevant what goes on in Paris or more abstract global time space. The locality has to be seen as a tangible instance of the global.

## Concluding remarks

Critique remains a floating signifier in both of the author’s texts, although in the first one it refers primarily to the management of the past, while in the second it is primarily an agent of current and future change. Are they compatible, two sides of the same coin: one devoted to retrospective history and the other to contemporary politics? Although dealt with separately in these relatively short essays, we could try to re-unite them here, following the suggestion from the second text to view them as indeed complementary, as two perspectives that could be seen as mutually enforcing, a double-edged sword, to the war-minded scholar, or a form of peaceful “co-existence”, to us pacifists.

While it is easier for museums or centers of contemporary art to be critical and act as fora for political discussion, not least since so much of this art relates openly to contemporary politics, the strategy to devise a similar concept for a museum of (old) masterpieces is brilliant. To take artworks seriously, as a form of living heritage and not just dead memories of themselves, they have to be re-visited, thus re-contextualized and put to work actively and creatively for each new public and each new interest. They may thus be regarded as critical not despite of but because of their musealization, as the argument goes, which makes them powerful, symbolic objects with accumulated cultural weight. When such auratic objects are, moreover, called on to perform or reform current ideas, to illustrate or question issues anachronistic to the pieces themselves, a political dimension is inevitably unleashed (the direction of which is another issue). What all this implies is that for the museum to be or become critical, it must remain un- or better, acritical. For the museum to intervene, challenge or “disrupt” its own premises or narratives, it must remain a stranger to itself. For the museum to perform critical difference, the split, gap or trauma-like wound must be safeguarded, prevented from ever quite healing.

What Piotrowski contributes to critical museography is a connection between new art history and museum exhibitions, in a way to perform a double-sided but anti-dichotomous strategy (even to himself), interpreted museographic decisions to make use of traumatic and traumatic strategies. A more promising model is the critical museum, which I interpret as a way to perform a double-sided but anti-dichotomous strategy to read historical works as contemporary and contemporary ones as (already or potentially) historical; where recent history is seen as both traumatogenic and as a way to come to terms with this and build a different future (thus a different history) with art and public dialogue and critical debate. However, at the risk of mimicking words, I must conclude with a reflection

on terminology. Does not the decision to pin the epithet “critical” to the entire museum run the risk of ossifying the desired criticality of such an institution? Could not the move to institutionalize critique, to make it a permanent part of the building, its site and contents, be counter-productive, or even contradictory? Does not the critical potential and agency of the critical museum rely on the non- or acritical character of its musealized exhibits? Could not a whole critical museum run the risk of becoming uncritically “critical”, i.e. critical as a default mode for everything of importance, as Felksi raised concerns about? Beyond ancient museum critique and the critical museum, which would involve maintaining the friction and differential energy unlocked between a stable material of musealized heritage and the shifting critical interests and needs of the present.<sup>24</sup>

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- E.g. Cathy N. Davidson, *Unlearned Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1990) (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins U.P., 2016); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 2001); Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Post-war Identity* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2019).
- Ethnologically, the Greek word *trauma* means injury or wound, originally in a physical and later psychic sense. Cf. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=trauma> (accessed April 14, 2021).

- 13 Piotr Sztompka, "The Trauma of Social Change: a Case of Postcommunist Societies", in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: The Univ. of California Press, 2004), 155–195 esp. 158, 168. Piotrowski refers to this source in note 21.
- 14 "...an event can only be understood as traumatic *after* the fact, through the symptoms and flashbacks and the delayed attempts at understanding that these signs of disturbance produce". Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 1, 5.
- 15 It is of course possible to subsequently recollect our being previously traumatized, but that is hardly the point the author wishes to make here.
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- 29 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: Norton, 1981), 53–64.
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- 31 Cf. Linara Dovidaitytė, "Post-Soviet Writing of History: The Case of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius", *Kunsteiaduslikke uurimusi*, 2010, Vol.19 (3+04), 105–120; Neringa Stoškutė, "Tension Between Everyday Practice and the New Museology Theory: A Case of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius", *Art History & Criticism*, 2017-12-01, Vol.13 (1), 76–87.
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