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What next for museums in a time of planetary crisis?

Discussion panel moderated by Michael John Gorman

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Michael John Gorman: introduction

After a long and stimulating day, we are now going to talk about what could come next for museums in a time of planetary crisis. We began the day with Brad Irwin from the Natural History Museum in London, who quoted Sir David Attenborough saying that: “The future of the natural world, on which we all depend, is in our hands.” We also just heard Molly Fannon from UN Live tell us that the only way to change mindsets and to change behaviour is through culture. It seems that museums have a particular opportunity to be this interface between nature and culture as we face very uncertain times.

We will be exploring some of these topics in this panel. We are, as you all know and as has been discussed during the day, facing a number of crises, not just a single crisis. On the one hand we have the global environmental crises: the climate crisis and the biodiversity crash, both topics that occupy us at Biotopia are particularly occupied with. These are crises where museums arguably have an opportunity to be

trusted platforms for educational activities and for public engagement at a time of uncertainty. This is a really important role of the museum. On the other hand, as has been mentioned by several speakers today, museums and their collections are themselves under threat through the pandemic keeping away visitors and sadly causing a great number of museums around the world to close their doors, but also through natural disasters caused by climate change and other factors. I'm hoping that at the end of this intense day, we will now have an opportunity to find some inspiration amidst these many challenges that we face, and that we can be hopeful as we go back to our museums or our home-offices, however it may be at the moment.

Let me introduce the panelists. We have Molly Fannon joining us – we've just heard her wonderful keynote about UN Live, the Museum for the United Nations in Copenhagen. We also have the nuclear physicist and imaging expert Giuseppe Maino from the University of Bologna. Giuseppe Maino has been working very closely with Isber Sabine, whom we've heard from this afternoon, and Donatella Biagi on very important projects on migrant/refugee communities and museums, among many other things. We also have Michael Faber, our risk management expert, who gave that rather frightening talk earlier on about catastrophes that may befall museums. And finally, coming from outside the museum world, we have Etienne Denk, a student in Philosophy at the Munich University. Etienne Denk is an activist involved in the Fridays for Future movement here in Germany.

Molly, you gave us a huge amount of food for thought in your presentation and also a call to action. The "Count Us In" project that you were talking about might be a truly interesting opportunity for museums. What I find particularly exciting about your vision for UN Live and a museum *for* the UN, as you pointed out, rather than *about* the UN, is this idea of a distributed museum and a museum being a platform for activism as well as a catalyst for change, including behaviour change. Could you please tell us how you see the role of museums in triggering change in behaviour?

Molly Fannon: the role of museums in triggering change

I think that we as institutions have the capacity to really be a catalyst for further change, but that requires that we get out of our comfort zone. There are few institutions in the world certainly that are doing that, like Biotopia for example, institutions that are really taking risks and stepping out of educational missions and into advocacy – just what I can imagine Etienne would urge us to do. I do think it basically requires that we take greater risks faster, and that we jump in first and figure it out later.

I've told you just before that I moved from Washington DC to Copenhagen to help build our museum UN Live, but not to build an institution for Copenhagen and for Denmark. It was to build an institution that enables museums and cultural organisations all over the world to work together in ways that they couldn't before, and in order to trigger people into change. One of the ways that we can most effectively do that, I think, is to work with the behaviour change scientific community and to bring the leading findings from that discipline into our organisation, so that we can engage in new ways with our audiences. We also have the responsibility to share those new ways with the wider cultural sector, to be radically generous in the way that we learn and fail with each-other. We have to share those datasets that our audiences offer and give them back to the scientific community. We could thus create a new commons, a public good of behaviour change in action, so that ten years from now, we would be able to say "we did something differently and this is how humanity responded".

This is particularly important because we can't just rely on people like Etienne who are already convinced that action is needed. We need the 60% to 70% of humanity that are essentially the "swing voters" on these issues, who do care deeply about the planet, who do want a better world but who feel relatively isolated and alone, and that we as institutions probably already have connections to. So, if we can

figure out how to speak to this group that hasn't yet become activist in all of these issues, and help them understand how they can do that in their everyday lives, we then start to echo up that everybody can make their mark collectively: that is the goal. We can't do it alone, we have to work with other institutions around the world. I think that's the only way, because how to do so, how to move people to care is going to be different in different cultural contexts.

Michael John Gorman

Answering a question after your session, you spoke briefly about some aspects of the Covid-19 experience. Some people have talked about the response to the pandemic as being like a giant global behaviour change experiment. While obviously it's been causing huge challenges on many different levels, some people have pointed to possible learnings or even silver linings from the pandemic. Is there anything you can point to from your experience? Can you give us interesting examples of the pandemic actually triggering responses which we can learn from?

Molly Fannon: learning from the Covid-19 pandemic

Well, we're able to be human beings and think differently about our lives now. Actually, Covid-19 is a terrible thing happening to the world. But it also shows us what we're capable of, and the vast majority of humanity is taking individual action in the service of others with an empathy and a compassion for others. We heard from the head of behavioural economics at Princeton that if you can leverage culture to create new social norms, you can fast forward cultural change. For example, we've seen how different forms of celebrities in all sorts of cultural genres have begun to take up the notion of basic public health

measures, which had for the most part a very positive impact. In my own home country, the United States, there also have been some celebrities who have done the opposite, showing their power to influence change of social norms, but not for good. Thus, we need to be aware they can be used in both ways.

We are experiencing environmental issues, as I already said in my last session. I am convinced it is an imperative that we have all people understand this, because there still are people who do not understand that our own health is connected to the health of the planet. It is for the most part an incredibly good news story of what we are capable of as humanity. And I think we should be celebrating that and look into how we can take that capability and take it forward into other issues.

Michael John Gorman

Following up on that: Michael, your work really deals with the worst-case scenarios in museums and you told us a number of quite terrifying stories in that regard. Following the pandemic, do you think that visitors' expectations around safety in museums have fundamentally changed? Can we really expect that visitors' attitude and approaches to safety in museums and their expectations will be different in the future?

Michael Faber: visitors' attitude towards security

It still is a little bit critical to examine the situation while using a new tool. I'm not sure if the visitors – meaning the physical visitors on-site – are now expecting more concerning safety security in the museums. I think that the museums have experienced three points where they still have to learn more. First, of course, there is the

documentation, the communication of the interrelation of culture, nature, environment. The second point is, in my opinion, the design of all work and operating processes, all activities in the museum, which have to be designed according to the criteria of environmental compatibility and sustainability. The third factor is the protection of the cultural property as well as the protection of all people during their stay or their work in the museum against negative influences from the environment.

I can speak a little bit from my museum, or rather my former museum, the big open-air museum in Kommern near Cologne in Germany. We had started with the HSSE standards of security management eight years before. People have seen what we have done. They have seen for example the benches for the visitors, they have seen the automatic doors, the elevators, the rescue equipment like automatic defibrillator in the space. Many visitors have seen on their own the interventions done by members of the staff. I don't know if there is a change of recognition by the visitors or an expectation for more.

Michael John Gorman

This is interesting. We are both in Germany, and Etienne as well, and we just had to close our museums about two weeks ago because of the new lockdown here. I'm not sure if open-air museums also had to close. What about your open-air museum, Michael, did you also have to close?

Michael Faber: lockdowns in an open-air museum

Of course, we also had a lockdown. It was a total lockdown in the first weeks, then we had the chance to open again, particularly in the

summer months, with reduced entrance fees and a very different safety programme for the audiences. The visitors were introduced to this programme by our website, where they usually go for preparing the visit to the museum. The security staff in the museum also gave all visitors the information needed to safely manage their visit.

Michael John Gorman

This is quite interesting: here in Bavaria for example, we have these rules where museums all have to close for the moment, but out-of-school learning places can be open. This leads to the point that museums maybe need to be perceived more as these, as platforms for education – and, as Molly was saying, as platforms for activism as well. I also see something very interesting at this point about the new focus that people have about health. If one links environmental issues to health issues, maybe we have a chance to make these more relevant and more urgent to people.

Now let's turn to Giuseppe Maino, who is speaking to us from Bologna. We greatly enjoyed hearing from your colleague Isber Sabine about this important work on the cultural integration of migrants into museum activities. I know that you yourself have worked very much in the Middle East, in Asia, in Africa around the question of integrating migrant perspectives into museums. You have thoughts about how museums could work better to integrate migrant and refugee perspectives, as we face these future crises of migration which are also deeply linked to environmental problems as well as war. Climate change as well will produce many millions of refugees in the coming years.

Giuseppe Maino: integrating migrant perspectives into museum activities

We are faced of course with a planetary emergency having different causes all linked together. Environmental food crises determine migration. War and the subsequent destruction of cultural heritage, as in Palmyra or Mosul, create migrants and induce the problem of their inclusion in our western societies. The demographic aspect of the problem has been well-known by demographers and statisticians for many decades now. Another crucial aspect of the problem is that we are facing difficulties of communication between the two cultures, as was found out also many years ago.

Scientists generally ignore historians, conservators, restorers, and more broadly the humanities as a whole. The reverse is also true. For instance, 50 years ago, the Club of Rome, a non-profit organisation founded by Aurelio Peccei and the Scottish scientist Alexander King, realised a report on the limits of growth, where – of course with many mistakes in the predictions – many of the problems we are now faced with were already discussed and presented. Let me mention another very recent fact: we are no more in the Holocene era. Actually, we entered the Anthropocene era in 1950. The concept of the Anthropocene means a geological time period influenced by human activities. This concept was introduced by a biologist, Eugene Stoermer, and by a chemist, a Nobel-prize winner for his studies on the ozone diffusion and effects on the atmosphere, Paul Crutzen.

We can afford this situation. Now we have new technologies, as discussed by many speakers today, which can provide some solutions or some ways to face this planetary emergency. Covid-19 is one of those dramatic emergencies, but it can also be a huge opportunity to develop a real collaboration between people, between different cultures – including the cultures of science and humanities, or the western and eastern cultures, and so on – to promote new initiatives.

I would like to suggest three possible aims that can be reached by means of new technologies, namely digital technologies and the worldwide web. The first one is that we can have a real network of museums and provide a kind of meta museum. By that, I mean a digital museum that collects all information about real and virtual museums, for instance about climate change or about migrations. We have many, many museums dedicated to migration all around the world. We also have the possibility to have museums on the destruction of cultural heritage by natural catastrophes, by wars, by terrorism. Thus, we can realise a meta museum that collects all this information as well as interviews with the migrants about their history, their experience etc. For this, young people can provide a very valuable help. Young people are now very concerned with planetary emergencies and the needs, and I think for instance Fridays for Future can provide a very valuable support to this initiative.

A second possibility, in my eyes, is to develop the study of history. History now is a neglected discipline. It is sad, it is disturbing, but so it is. We see it since for instance physicists or other scientists neglect the history of their disciplines in their own publications. This is a matter of concern for all the people like me, but the younger researchers are not interested in history. Even in the field of humanities, history became quite a “bad” word. My colleagues art historians in the University of Bologna, for example, don’t use the word “history” in the names of their teaching any more. “History of art literacy” is no more used, only “art literacy”. It is considered as a sort demoniac word nowadays – which causes a real damage: if we lose our history, we lose all our knowledge. I think history is important for migrants, but also for young people as well as for old people as I am.

Finally, my third proposal would be the following: I am on the editorial board of a scientific journal called *Atmosphere*, and I would like to propose a special issue on climate change and cultural heritage and museums. If you agree, we could realise such an issue on a scientific journal but with the contribution of historians, of conservators, of

restorers, and present a common handbook for teaching and for diffusion.

Michael John Gorman

It sounds like a wonderful idea. That kind of interdisciplinary approach to climate change and cultural institutions will be very valuable.

Now last and not least, I want to turn to Etienne Denk. Giuseppe already mentioned Fridays for Future. Etienne, could you start with saying a little bit about what you are doing with Fridays for Future? Do you feel that museums can be more relevant to the Fridays for Future generation?

Etienne Denk: Fridays for Future and the relevance of museums

First of all, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Molly Fannon for her wonderful keynote, she said nearly everything I wanted to share here with you. It's really amazing to see that the process is already going, so thank you for that.

Let's start with some thoughts about Fridays for Future. I suppose many of you have heard about Fridays for Future or generally the movement of the youth. It grew out of a feeling: we all are kids or in the youth, and we trust the adults that they have everything under control. We grew up and we didn't give much thoughts on planetary emergency or anything like that. And then some day, we realised there's nothing, the adults don't have it under control, especially not the adults with responsibilities, i.e. the politicians. So, in that moment, we all felt very much fear, anger and frustration. The situation is totally overwhelming to us all and the youths because of those strong feelings. Our protest, or what we are mainly doing is striking and going on the streets, telling everyone about these feelings, about our anger,

our frustration, our fear concerning our future. We are all seeing that the politicians are not addressing climate change as they should. That's what we've been doing since 2018 now. We managed to grow very big in about 150 countries or something like that. It took a dimension that is really exciting. For example, on 20 September 2019, we had a global climate strike with over 4 million people. We are mainly addressing the different conflicts that emerge from climate crisis, like the conflict between First Nations and the most effective people in areas around the world, or the conflict between my generation and the older generations.

Now let's go away from all the conflicts and protest, and back to the museum, more precisely to the role of museums. The first important point concerns the knowledge and the real understanding of what the climate crisis is. This is a difficult point, since in society in general, we don't have the knowledge we need to address climate change in the way we should. That's the part of the museum you know better than me with its educational role. Unfortunately, we realise now that the education system in schools and universities is a great failure in addressing the topic of climate change. Museums can be a part of the solution to address it.

But far more important is another aspect: to give room for discourse. I just mentioned the conflicts inside society, and we need spaces for the society, for the different bubbles and the different generations who don't meet much in political discourses. We need spaces for them to meet, spaces where the discourse is not just a conflict, or not just hate or anger or frustration. We need rooms where the discourse, the debate can be a bit moderated, a bit guided by science. We simply don't have enough of these rooms. Museums can be one of those spaces. Maybe they have to consider themselves not just as communicators on their own by their education, but also as someone who guides the communication of others and be a space for it. This would be a main topic for me for the museums, and I want to address a point that Molly Fannon already said: in the political debate, museums are

institutions that can communicate *as* institutions and not just with the people who visit the museum. Museums can participate in the debate as political beings. Taking over that role and really positioning themselves in the debate would mean a great deal to all the climate movement. It makes sure we really have science backing our action and that science communicates offensively, saying “hey, we *need* this change”. That would be my great prayer to museums.

Michael John Gorman

The two ideas you just expressed are really important to me. It means first of all that museums should be unafraid to engage in these debates, to come out from behind the walls of the museum and be vocal. It also means that we have the weight of expertise and the science to back us up. We have seen recently that museums are incredibly trusted institutions by the public, so we really do have an amazing resource that we can use if we wish. I really love the other point that you made as well, Etienne: we need to think of museums as a way to get people outside of their echo chamber. We need to think of museums as places where people from different communities can come together, and also come together with experts in a stimulating social environment where these kinds of discussions can be had. I think you’re right, it’s hard to find those places. Museums really have an opportunity to satisfy thirst for these places.

Finally, I would like to ask all of you if you could share one hope that you have for museums that are trying to reinvent themselves in this time of planetary crises?

Etienne Denk: the process has already started and a unique way of communication

I'm a bit cheating, I have two hopes. Events like this conference today are showing me that the process is already going, so that this is not a fight we have to take on again, which is my first hope. Actually, events like this are a support for the climate movement, and this is a hope for itself. The second, very big hope is about communication. Looking at the way of communicating that museums are able to do, with all senses, with seeing, really putting the human being back in the centre of the debate, this way of communicating is unique. Whenever those ways of communication are a support for the climate movement, that is really truly hopeful.

Michael Faber: museums make a link between past and future

You know that the word “culture” derives from Latin and means celebration and cultivation of nature and lands. Museums are cultural institutions and they do address this interdependence, especially against the background of existential emergency situations. I think many of the museums are doing so, they are well in-between. Take for example open-air museums which are showing contemporary history: they are inclusive and involving old people as well as young people in discussions about the change of living conditions and so on. They are documenting this physically in workshops, in the museum – if the museum is open and not closed – or they do it online. We had a lot of very good results documented in the open-air museum Kommern and we present these results to the public. I think that we are on a good way and of course many museums, such as natural history museums, medical history museums, museums of cultural anthropology and so on, offer good opportunities. My hope is that they will use these chances of communicating about our future.

Giuseppe Maino: hope for the future development of the museum

Despite of the objects it concerns, the museum is a very young boy. It was born in the Enlightenment century, so he has less than three centuries of life. I don't know what the future will be for the museum. It has to increase, to grow, and I think there are many surprises for us in the future of the museum, in its organisation, in the presentation and in the teaching of history.

Molly Fannon: change our institutions in order to make a positive impact

Out of many hopes, there is one I want to share, one that is a little bit more helpful, and in a way more urging to you. When I was getting ready to move my three young daughters to Copenhagen, my oldest at the time was just seven. She said: "Mummy I don't want to move. I don't want to leave my friends." I answered: "We really have to go, it's very important." She looked up at me and said: "OK, because you're going to fight global warming and you're going to fix it, right?", and I said "Yes, Catherine, that's what Mummy's going to do." And that is what we have. Whether or not to take action is a false choice. We are all taking action, we're either taking positive action in a way that Etienne is asking us to, or we're abdicating our responsibility, which is an action in itself. I think we need to push our institutions and I really would like to echo to Giuseppe: we need to bring history in, because history shows the power of how we can do really big things together and what could happen if we don't. My hope is that we demonstrate to my young daughter and to all of the young people in the world that we care enough to get out of our echo chambers and to change institutions, so that we can make a positive impact and leave the world a better pace.

Michael John Gorman

Thank you so much to you all. First of all, I would like to thank our hosts, ICOM Germany, ICOM Greece and ICOM Cyprus, for organising today's event. I would also really like to thank our wonderful panelists, Molly Fannon, Giuseppe Maino, Etienne Denk and Michael Faber for this discussion. I hope you all feel, as I do, inspired to rethink how we create museums – also for our own project in Munich, I'm full of ideas now about how we can make it a sociable engaging space. Thank you all for these fantastic insights.