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(This conference report has been written by an associated member of the MPRG “Objects in the Contact Zone” on behalf of the organizers)

On 26-28 September 2013, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck Institut held a three-day conference entitled “Images of the Art Museum. Connecting Gaze and Discourse in the History of Museology”. The conference was organized by Eva Troelenberg and Melania Savino, and it was the first international event promoted by the Max Planck Research Group “Objects in the Contact Zone: The Cross Cultural Life of Things”, coordinated by Dr Troelenberg.

The symposium aimed to analyze implications and consequences arising from the way we look at art works and objects in museums, in relation to the creation of a specific rhetoric about these institutions. It underlined how issues such as knowledge and agency are intertwined with others like pleasure and desire, but also power and even manipulation. The MPRG’s primary focus is studying cross-cultural representations of artworks and artifacts through media and institutions. Therefore, the projects the research group is involved analyze the historical, epistemological and sociological agency of art works when by changing contexts they also create a new narrative. The symposium gathered together scholars from art history, anthropology and archaeology. All the papers yet presented unexplored images of art museums from historical, but also political, cultural and social perspectives.

Recently, scholars from the humanities have focused attention on the fact that museums are not just a “European” creation. Yet, art museums embody a cultural power associated with a metaphorical image of the institution – i.e., an encyclopedia, a cultural district, an arsenal, a mausoleum, a temple, and a forum. However, since the 1990s, the field of museum studies has become more critical of the role, function, and narrative creation performed by these institutions. Gradually, the image of the art museum has shifted from being national and international to being universal and global. This shift in perspective has revealed the entangled political questions implicit in the museums’ definitions of cultural values and cultural policies, but also poetics and interpretations. The purpose of the conference was to
feed into a growing “meta-discourse” on the past and present representations of the art museum in a literal and figurative way. It showed how museums have become icons of our time, exploring photographs from albums, journals, catalogues but also images from art installations, temporary exhibitions, cultural events, art works, movies and the web.

Though the conference was not structured according to a strict chronology, all the thematic sessions sought to combine historical and more recent or contemporary points of view. Since the early 18th century, objects displayed in private collections, cabinets of curiosities and public art galleries were frequently reproduced in hand-made drawings and sketches by travelers, art amateurs and collectors. The talk given by Charles Kang (Columbia University) was central to this topic and focused on Joseph Bonnier’s drawings reproducing his cabinet of curiosities. Kang’s paper demonstrated that more than providing an accurate testimony, these illustrations altered - if not even falsified - the real size and content of the collection. Similarly, Valentina Conticelli (Uffizi Gallery) showed romantic sketches picturing the Tribuna of the Uffizi in the early 18th century seen through the eyes of a young art amateur, Sir Roger Newdigate. As part of the 18th century discourse on museum images, Lynda Mulvin (UCC) talked about the origins of the National Gallery of Ireland, and especially about Kenhelm Digby’s scientific watercolours, originally made to record archaeological artifacts, but then used to illustrate the Gallery collection in the catalogue. Inasmuch as reproductions, drawings and prints shaped national identities and cultures during the 18th century, as did Universal Exhibitions and fairs a century later. In relation to this topic, Stephanie Moser (University of Southampton) explored how Universal Exhibitions such as the 1850 Great Exhibition shaped Victorian imagery of past and exotic cultures. In her paper, she showed that displays of Egyptian artworks impacted not only the imagery of museums, but also the public’s epistemological approach to antiquity.

Christina Ferando (Columbia University), instead, investigated how artworks become synecdoche of the museum itself, presenting the case of the Venus of Milo, which was used by the Louvre to compensate for the loss of the Medici Venus after the fall of Napoleon in 1815. Martin Gaier (University of Basel) illustrated the 19th century protest of the ‘aesthetic heretics’ such as Quatremère de Quincy and Karl Hillebrand, who criticized museums as places meant to civilize people. From a contemporary perspective, Anastasia Kontogiorgi and Iro Katsaridou analyzed how the National Gallery of Athens shed light on El Greco as the symbol of Greek art and culture through temporary exhibitions during the 1990s, when Greece joined the European Union. Whereas, Marci Kwon (New York University) looked at China in the 1980s to demonstrate that the modern art exhibitions - particularly those on Picasso, Munch and Rauschenberg - transformed the National Art Gallery of Beijing into a site of contestation against the Chinese government.

On the contrary, papers such as the one by Kathryn M. Floyd (Auburn University) discussed museums as iconic images and empty containers for new and unexplored meanings. In her presentation, Floyd analyzed the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel as a backdrop for the dOCUMENTA editions. Walter Grasskamp (Academy of Fine Arts in Munich) investigated Malraux’s musée imaginaire as a container of literary, art historical and photographic references. Taking Alfred Salmony’s critique and Maurice Jarnoux’s 1954 photography as Malraux’s early references, Grasskamp positioned the work of the French author within the encyclopedic tradition. The use of photography to present but also represent art collections was also analyzed by Alison Boyd (Northwestern University). Focusing on the contradicting reproductions of Albert Barnes’ art collection, Boyd pointed out that while the American
Collector never published coloured photographs of his French paintings, he nevertheless widely circulated black-and-white reproductions of his African sculptures. Norbert M. Schmitz (Muthesius Kunsthochschule Kiel) talked about the representation of museums in movies as images of cultural normativity with narrative functions in the popular medium’s aesthetics. Sandra Leandro (University of Evora) presented a case-study of the Portuguese national art exhibition A Thousand of Years of Portuguese Art, organized by and displayed at the Royal Academy of London between 1955 and 1956. Julia Kleinbeck (Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe) analyzed at how contemporary images of viewers in art museums strengthen the public perception that these institutions are made to be social spaces and to promote participatory practices.

Museums as cultural and political authorities were further analyzed by Eva Boniotupoulou and Stella Sylaiou (IHU&AUTH). Their paper investigated the political, symbolic and cultural implications arisen by the opening of the Abu-Dhabi Guggenheim on Saadiyat Island in the United Emirates. Similarly, Naomi Stead (University of Brisbane) reflected upon issues such as museums entrepreneurship and ‘place-branding’ strategies, referring them to the Queensland Art Gallery, GoMA, in the city of Brisbane (Australia). Qanita Lilla (Museum of Islamic Art, Doha) looked at art museums as boosters of a national rhetoric, and presented the critical study of the South African National Art Gallery during the 1940s. Eva Troelenberg (KHI) analyzed how the reconstruction of the Mshatta façade in the East Berlin Museum Island became a metaphor for post-WWII Germany’s resurrection in art, culture and democracy.

Two scholars looked at images of art museums as portrayed in scientific journals. Andrea Meyer (TU Berlin) portrayed the story of the German journal, Museumskunde, which was considered a central medium for transnational exchange among museum experts in the early 20th century. On the backdrop of the changing political scenario, Meyer showed how and why the first editions (1905-1924) presented images of European and non-European museums that were very different from the 1924-1939 editions, when the journal was the Deutsche Museumsbund’s official organ. Similarly, Melania Savino (KHI) analyzed how the international journal Museion established museology as a ‘global’ practice and built up a network between museum professionals, promoting a new educational role for art museums. Zehra Tonbul (Mardin Artukle University) talked about Orhan Pamuk’s museum dedicated to his book, Museum of Innocence, in Istanbul. Inasmuch as the novel has inspired the subject of the museum exhibition, the book has become an entrance ticket, the reader has turned into visitor and the author has taken on the role of curator.

Further, the conference dug into art collecting and historically portrayed 19th century art museums as institutions embedded in networks of private collectors, dealers and political representatives. Lynn Catterson (Columbia University) analyzed Bardini’s contribution to the creation of the taxonomy on Italian Renaissance sculpture, which was later codified by emergent art historians and dealers, and enforced by the larger European and American museums through their collections. Whereas, Barbara Lasic (V&A) reviewed the South Kensington Museum’s exhibitions after 1852 showing the great number of loans made by dealers and private collectors. These events were used as a platform for artistic exchange, and gave precious inputs to experts to rethink about artistic canons, categories and taxonomies of their exhibition display.

Irene Maffi (University of Lausanne) offered a perspective on the various images of Jordanian artistic and cultural heritage looking at official and un-official representations proposed by private collectors and archaeological museums over the last fifty years, striking a chord with
alternative museographies. Finally, Frederick Bohrer (Hood College) discussed the implications of what Hamid Dabashi has defined as the “post-Orientalist” condition, a concept that Eva Troelenberg had already mentioned in her introduction as central to the conference themes. Bohrer’s paper focused on universal survey museums such as the Louvre, the British Museum and the MET, and considered the post 9/11 re-display of their Islamic art collections. By identifying three types of displays – globalized, aesthetic and antiquarian – he analyzed the various museums’ representations of Middle Eastern visual cultures. Similarly, Yuka Kadoi (University of Edinburgh) researched how displays of Islamic art lie on the *limen* between challenging and enforcing traditional art history canons.

The benchmark represented by 9/11 in transcultural studies was also discussed during the evening program in a literary conversation between the German writer, Thomas Lehr and Gerhard Wolf (KHI). The point of departure was Lehr’s book, *September: Fata Morgana* (Hanser, 2010), which takes 9/11 as its *fulcrum*. In his novel, museums and musealized topographies appear as narrative spaces and sometimes even contact zones, aesthetically dissolving and critically breaking simple East-West dichotomies.

In conclusion, the conference has certainly looked at art museums worldwide as “contact zones”. Besides giving the right importance to the long tradition of museums within the Western and Eurocentric perspective, the symposium tried to stress how this image was translated and how it is currently negotiated. In this way, the event itself served as a contact zone for scholars to question cross-cultural interpretations, functions and meanings of the art museum as a global institution, which today has a polycentric rather than just a transcultural approach.