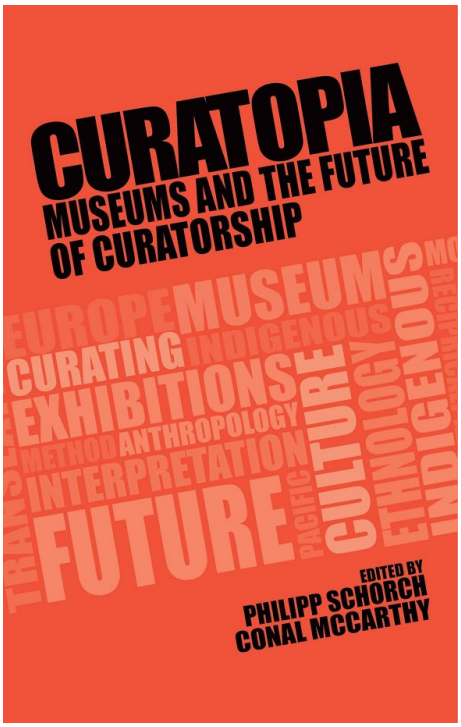
Samuel Benjamin Bachmann

Review: Curatopia. Museums and the Future of Curatorship



Schorch, Philipp; McCarthy, Conal (eds.): Curatopia. Museums and the Future of Curatorship. University Press, Manchester (2019). ISBN: 978-1-5261-1819-6.[1]

Me, the curator

Next to my daily affairs as a curator, there is hardly any time for reflexivity given the versatility of duties I am potentially responsible for. Did I take stock of the recently accepted donations? Are all actions taken in respect of the upcoming loan? Did I search the archives and databases for the relevant material and information related to a given collection or object? Perhaps an object that, yet, has an undocumented provenience and which I just accidentally came across because the media, a visitor, or a student from the nearby university asked me about it. Did I prepare the guided

tour for the marketing event on Saturday? Is everything I did well documented? Not to mention the regiment and variety of tasks coming up in line with the development of exhibitions or scientific conferences. I guess that many curators might recognise themselves, having a very similar list of tasks pending.

Many of my colleagues are admirably passionate professionals, in love with what they are doing day in and day out. Some of them are also remarkably self-critical about the ethical implications and the meaning of their role as curators, as "experts in the temple and facilitators in the forum"[2]. But most of the self-reflection, at least in my professional life, happens in line with the rare occasions of inter- and intra-institutional workshops or simply over a beer with colleagues after work. It is in these precious moments that I may ask myself "How did I become a curator?", "What am I actually doing as such and how am I supposed to do it?", "Is it different to what I expected and wished for it to be?", or "What do I, as a curator, have to become in the future?". The very same questions, furthermore, could also be asked with respect to the role of the museum in a society. Reading *Curatopia. Museums and the future of curatorship*, was exactly one of these precious moments for me.

The book is a compilation of twenty articles (and two "afterwords"), structured in three geographical parts with each part consisting of six contributions either stemming from or working on museum experiences in Europe, North America and the Pacific. In light of current post-colonial critics of the supremacy of the geographical category in European ethnographic museum collections, at first glance, this subdivision might look strange and different approaches would seem as appropriate. In reference to James Clifford[3], however, the editors, Schorch and McCarthy, portray the museum as "an inventive, globally and locally translated form, no longer anchored to its modern origins in Europe"[4] and as such this structure is rather attempting to create an outlook beyond European museum realities into cultural institutions that might follow different norms and practices, ideas of

heritage and conservation, or practices of education and outreach. *Curatopia* confronts European curatorship with museum realities in those places where many of the 'European' ethnographic collections – because of their meaning and significance for non-European, Indigenous identities and epistemologies – initially, currently or eventually belong.

The "terrible gift" of the Past

Even if it is the editors' explicit goal to present and create visions for curatorial and museological futures, *Curatopia* is, firstly, as much an assembly of analyses and de-constructions of the past of the museum as an institution and curating as its practice. The story of ethnographic museums is also the story of dealing with "the terrible gift"[5] of difficult histories, highlighting the complicity of the institution and the discipline with a colonial past by "underplaying the role of the colonial"[6] in their emergence. Some contributions point at ethnographic collecting in colonial contexts that "allow a glimpse into the contradictions in values that underlay the appropriation and extraction of enormous cultural riches from one side of the Earth to the other"[7]. Other contributions emphasise on power relations regarding the idea of the interplay of knowledge production and the creation of imagined communities "according to which ‚their' (the source communities') interpretative skills are supposed to enrich ‚our' (the institution's) curatorial work"[8]. And, generally, most authors get pretty clear about the fact that "there is no justification in not acknowledging the wrongs of the past"[9].

The variety of historical roles and forms of curatorship, emerging from the different critical analysis in *Curatopia*, is remarkable. Among others, descriptions range from "connoisseurial"[10] expert to "mediator"[11], recall it as a "foe, friend, and facilitator"[12],

or they highlight the perception of curators as being the "knowledgeable and loving guardians"[13] of heritage. The curator becomes the critical figure that has to manoeuvre "across colonial divides"[14], always confronted with multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting spatial and temporal narratives of historical contexts and meanings of material culture, and trapped in the gap between well-founded public expectations and underfunded organisational capabilities.

The Contradictions of the Present

Curatopia's achievement, secondly, is to systematically and convincingly work out the manifold contradictions in present-day ethnographic curating and museum work. It does so with examples related to different mandates of a museum, such as collecting, conservation, research, exhibitions, outreach or collaboration. The contradictions in museum work are made clear especially through the juxtaposition of a variety of Indigenous voices and ways of curatorship vis-à-vis institutionalised and alienated ethnographic museum collections. Indigenous ways of curating "are not necessarily at odds with international museological practices, but at times they fundamentally differ"[15].

There is neither denial nor ignorance towards current initiatives and attempts of museums to de-colonise collections or to re-connect them to the places of origin. But some authors also point at the fact that too many of these commitments have only been rhetorical. Some museum projects strategically reflect on and "incorporate critique without, however, fundamentally attending to its relevance for their own institutional status quo with regard to the politics of display, administrative structure and the museum's engagement with its manifold publics"[16] and, moreover, they "increasingly engage in a rhetoric that employs a decidedly postcolonial terminology, thereby mitigating the public demands of activists and

scholars alike for critical scrutiny(...)"[17].

In current ethnographic museums there are inconsistencies and ambiguities on practical as much as on a theoretical levels: an idea of a global community is challenged by the respect and appreciation for local realities. While some authors advocate for the inevitability of plurivocality in museum representation and narratives, others speak of "a potential to open up for commonsense, 'given histories'"[18] or rhetorically ask whether "linear narratives always (are) reductive and hegemonic?"[19]. Furthermore, museums have to constantly fight for their own scientific relevance while at the same time they must be profoundly critical about the idea of reducing and diminishing museum work to only scientific ends.

But reading *Curatopia*, in the first place, reminded me of the distance of ethnographic collections to those for whom they really meant, mean or could mean something. It reminded me of the fact that European ethnographic museums struggle till this date to systematically and cross-culturally collaborate in terms of physical exchange of museum objects. I, as curator, have to ask myself: How do I deal with the fact that 'my' museum was never meant to serve those people who originally were the subject of its remit? I think that these contradictions are very real in many curatorial lives but since curators have transformed to "multi-tasking generalists"[20], we constantly run the risk of losing sight of what is actually important.

Facing Forward Together

The ultimate achievement of *Curatopia* is to go beyond mere critics and to seriously engage in potential futures and concrete strategies, based on real curatorial experiences in museums in Europa, North America and the Pacific. In light of its programmatic title – and as an alternative to burning museums so to say – *Curatopia*

opens up a space where "museums have a role to play"[21]. Its core demand is to systematically de-colonise and, moreover, indigenise the Museum. In line with this message, The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa figures very prominently throughout the book and serves as a kind of role model when it comes to the appreciation, inclusion and implementation of indigenous curatorship, be it with respect to collecting strategies and ideas of ownership or to collaborative conservation and exhibition projects.[22]

Indigenising the museum means that those people with strong bonds to the material heritage preserved in museums – due to e.g. shared historical remembrance, cultural identities or social frameworks – not only are consulted or represented as one voice among others, but are an integral part of any potential museum affair. "The Maori People want to control their own heritage; they want to be the people who handle their taonga; they want to have knowledge to explain them to other cultures and to their own people; they want to define their own past and present existence; they want to control their own knowledge and they want to present themselves their way to the world and to themselves"[23]. The museum as a globally and locally translated form incorporates "not just *what* is being curated but also the politics and poetics of *how* it is being curated"[24] and portrays the figure of the kaitiaki', the Maori guardian, as one local translation of curatorial practice, "embedded in wider social relations"[25].

In *Curatopia*, the notions of the *Indigenous* or *Indigeneity* remain, in my opinion, controversial terminologies, always running the risk of just replacing the notion of *the others* or of constructing essentialist dichotomies. Who and what is the Indigenous and, moreover, is there a vis-à-vis of the Indigenous? And if yes, what is the role of the Non-indigenous? In my daily business, I have to consider a public that does not conceive itself to be Indigenous. I also want to belief in the museum as a necessarily political place where the inclusion of all kinds of publics is essential in order for it to be legitimate and relevant. The notion of the *Indigenous* has to

withstand the notion of the *Imagined Community* not by denying local identities but by being self-critical about its own construction of the self.

I think that by drawing on the concept of *Indigenizing the Museum*, *Curatopia* sometimes misses to consider that any sort of curatorship, the Indigenous as well as any potential other one, remains an accomplice of a narrative, that is always political when told in the Museum and to which there are always alternatives. This is where the consideration and the development of a *Curatopia* have to tie in, because, when it comes to visions of the future, necessarily many frameworks and ideas clash and must be negotiated. Even if we portray the museum as a "contact zone"[26], where these clashes and negotiations ought to take place, we have to constantly ask: Whose interests does the "contact zone" serve and who has paid for it? Who is not represented? What are the limits of the zone? etc. These questions, in reality, often are beyond curatorial exertion of influence, but are part of the political embedment of an institution.

Curatopia, however, offers theoretical and practical links to deal with the process of mutual transformation of realities and narratives; like in the case of *colonialism* "that has neither been complete in the past nor completed in the present"[27]. Thus, on a theoretical level, the editors propose a dialectical approach to deal with the inconsistencies and ambiguities faced in the museum and suggest that "(...) there has to be a constant analytical movement between the "here" and the "there", the "now" and "back then", to make sense of these messy entanglements"[28].

Moreover, and through the notion of the "significance of personal encounters"[29], *Curatopia* is a commitment to the inevitability of "facing forward together"[30], wherein, as Onciul adds, some practical, curatorial principles are just very simple: "respect the people; present yourself face-to-face; look, listen, ...speak; share and host people, and be generous; be cautions; do not trample over the mana (authority,

reputation) of people; and don't flaunt your knowledge"[31].

Thus, there is a lot that I learned from this book. But, in particular, I learned, again, to never stop learning. It confirmed the significance of self-reflection, and showed me the importance of constantly negotiating the questions anew: "How did the Museum become what it is today?", "What is it actually doing as such and how is it supposed to do it?", "Is the Museum different to what people expect and wish for it to be?", or "What does the Museum have to become in the future?".

The book suggests answering these questions together and through the inclusion of Indigenous concepts, ideas and practices of museums and curatorship. It is made clear that, in order to de-colonise museums, provenience research and re-phrased terminologies in public communication are not enough, but that profound and sincere engagement with other philosophies of e.g. heritage, memory, or education are requested. "Such epistemological and ontological reframing can transform the mutual, asymmetrical relations underpinning global, scientific entanglements of the past and turn them into reciprocal, symmetrical forms of cross-cultural curatorship and anthropology in present, a task we have advocated recently and to which this volume is devoted"[32].

---

[1] All references in the review are listed in: Schorch, Philipp; McCarthy, Conal (eds.): Curatopia. Museums and the Future of Curatorship. University Press, Manchester (2019).

[2] Onciul, Bryony: "Community engagement, Indigenous heritage and the complex figure of the curator: foe, facilitator, friend or forsaken?", p.160.

[3] Clifford, James: “The times of the curator”, p.109-123.

[4] McCarty, Conal; Hakiwai, Arapata; Schorch, Phillip: “The figure of the kaitiaki: learning from Maori curatorship past and present”, p.211; cp. Clifford, James: “The times of the curator”, p.109-123.

[5] Golding, Viv; Modest, Wayne: “Thinking and working through difference: remaking the ethnographic museum in the global contemporary”, p.100.

[6] Ibid., p.101.

[7] Sandahl, Jette: “Curating across colonial divides”, p.73.

[8] Förster, Larissa; von Bose, Friedrich: “Concerning curatorial practice in ethnological museums: an epistemology of postcolonial debates”, p.48.

[9] Thode-Arora, Hilke: “Walking the fine line: From Samoa with Love? At the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich”, p.61.

[10] Cp. Macdonald, Sharon; Morgan, Jennie: “What not to collect? Post-connoisseurial dystopia and the profusion of things”, p.29-43.

[11] Ibid., p.39f.

[12] Cp. Onciul, Bryony: “Community engagement, Indigenous heritage and the complex figure of the curator: foe, facilitator, friend or forsaken?”, p.159ff.

[13] Clifford, James: “The times of the curator”, p.110.

[14] Sandahl, Jette: “Curating across coloniale divides”, p.72ff.

[15] McCarty, Conal; Hakiwai, Arapata; Schorch, Phillip: “The figure of the kaitiaki:

learning from Maori curatorship past and present", p.217.

[16] Förster, Larissa; von Bose, Friedrich: "Concerning curatorial practice in ethnological museums: an epistemology of postcolonial debates", p.48.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Clifford, James: "The times of the curator", p.109.

[19] Phillips, Ruth: "Swings and roundabouts: pluralism and the politics of change in Canada's national museums", p.155.

[20] Onciul, Bryony: "Community engagement, Indigenous heritage and the complex figure of the curator: foe, facilitator, friend or forsaken?", p.169.

[21] Clifford, James: "The times of the curator", p.118; Onciul, Bryony: "Community engagement, Indigenous heritage and the complex figure of the curator: foe, facilitator, friend or forsaken?", p.162.

[22] See: Sandahl, Jette: p.80ff.; McCarty, Conal; Hakiwai, Arapata; Schorch, Phillip: p.211ff.; Labrum, Bronwyn: Collecting, curating and exhibiting cross-cultural material histories in a post-settler society: p.244ff.; Mallon, Sean: Agency and authority: the politics of co-collecting: 279ff.

[23] McCarty, Conal; Hakiwai, Arapata; Schorch, Phillip: "The figure of the kaitiaki: learning from Maori curatorship past and present", p.215f.

[24] Ibid.: p.212.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Cp. Clifford, James: "The times of the curator", p.111; Thomas, Nicholas: "The museum as a method (revisited)", p.26; Förster, Larissa; von Bose, Friedrich:

“Concerning curatorial practice in ethnological museums: an epistemology of postcolonial debates”, p.46.

[27] Schorch, Philipp; McCarthy, Conal; Dürr, Eveline: “Introduction: conceptualizing Curatopia”, p.11.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Cp. Kahanu, Noelle M.K.Y.; Nepia, Moana; Schorch, Philipp: ”He alo a he alo / kanohi kit e kanohi / face-to-face: curatorial bodies, encounters and relations”, p.296ff.

[30] Ibid.: p.300.

[31] Cp. Onciul, Bryony: “Community engagement, Indigenous heritage and the complex figure of the curator: foe, facilitator, friend or forsaken?”, p.163.

[32] McCarty, Conal; Hakiwai, Arapata; Schorch, Phillip: “The figure of the kaitiaki: learning from Maori curatorship past and present”, p.222.