

Proceedings

The Images of a Museum. Participatory and Educational Pathways Branching out from a Heritage Asset. The Ettore Guatelli Museum as a Case Study [†]

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Abstract: This paper explores a series of practical and enquiry-based projects conducted by the Ettore Guatelli Museum in collaboration with local community actors and partner institutions including the University of Milano Bicocca: a training programme for teachers at a local group of schools, the Istituto Comprensivo of Collecchio; the creation of a new museum—an ongoing project with the schools of the Istituto Comprensivo of Lesignano; a reinterpretation of the Guatelli museum itself by young artists participating in the “Contemporary Guatelli” project. The chosen strategy of those directing the Ettore Guatelli Museum is to foster participation, allowing the many images suggested by its cultural patrimony to freely emerge, based on a shared belief in multiple interpretive possibilities.

Keywords: museum art education; objects; narration; didactic museum; participation; contemporary art

1. Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of a special place, the Ettore Guatelli Museum [1] in Ozzano Taro in the province of Parma, with a unique patrimony of objects originally collected and exhibited by its founder Ettore Guatelli (1921–2000): at the initiative of its staff, the Museum has chosen to develop novel paths of enquiry and study, in which the plural images and diverse perspectives to which it gives rise, can take shape and enjoy the right to exist.

Since its inception, the museum has always maintained an educational focus, as the founder himself liked to recount to visitors [2]. This vision has evolved and been enriched over time, as the diverse interpretations of those visiting the museum have been incorporated. The museum’s other founding characteristics include its sensitivity to the local area and its needs; and its close ties with schools, which it views as a key part of its identity, and young artists. Such are the key features of the museum’s past and present. The practical and enquiry-based projects presented here have been chosen amongst the museum’s many initiatives as representative of its long-term strategic direction, which is not without its challenges, and which necessarily involves direct contact and mutual “contamination” between the museum and various other actors, including schools, local authorities, universities, and cultural associations. As mentioned above, the museum’s key defining feature is the rich variety and vast number of objects it contains, which occupy its spaces in a way that is both harmonious and aesthetically intense. It has been the very presence and existence of these things,

which belong to everyday life in the past and present, that has guided reflection on the possible interpretive perspectives that might be brought to bear on the museum.

They evoke the concept of objecthood which has come to the fore in many prominent contemporary lines of enquiry. This construct is shared by multiple disciplines and goes hand in hand with recognition of the need to engage in dialogue with non-specialist audiences [3–8]. Hence, we first provide an overview of the museum's activities, before going on to offer an in-depth analysis of the three sample projects, which have also been selected based on their salience to the conference theme of "images and imagination between representation, communication and education", first in light of developments in Italian and international museum education, and second in relation to their educational benefits and outcomes in terms of the cross-contamination of different perspectives.

2. The Case Study: Ettore Guatelli Museum

Ettore Guatelli was born in Collecchio on 18 April 1921 (1921–2000), a primary schoolteacher, collector of objects and stories, ethnographer, and visionary museographer, who linked stories with things, and dialogued with poets and professors, photographers and graphic designers, craftsmen, farmers and scrap metal dealers. Ettore was the child of tenant farmers in Ozzano Taro in the province of Parma, where the complex of rural buildings that house his collection of 60,000 objects is located. Ettore's work is open and invites dialogue; it stands ready to receive and welcome. The pathways through his museum, which lead from things to life itself, through everyday objects, skills, knowledge, and ingeniousness, through repairs and the poetics of hybrid forms, structure his entire collection, which is ultimately a work of narrative.

There is a law that underpins the exhibiting of objects, a kind of invisible order that seeks to establish a thread of meaning: this may be observed when visitors are offered "one end of a ball of thread" in the form of a word or the detail of a scene or object which "stands out" and when attended to reveals the unfolding of life stories and experiences. In putting together his museum, Ettore Guatelli wished to give a home to the biographies and histories of humanity that are communicated by things. He was therefore first and foremost a collector of men and women and expressed this by collecting the objects that were part of people's lives.

The house and museum are the twin souls of Guatelli's work, the realization, over two floors, of a single idea, the notion of a collection of objects composing a broad text narrating the history of the humble and the everyday. The museum is a place of museographic experimentation and narrative exhibits (the wheels room, staircase, toys room, drawing-room, kitchen and shoes room), while the house more clearly expresses his passion for collecting (including Ettore's own room, the music room, the room of the glass jars and that of the tins, watches and ceramics gallery). In the house, the accumulation and positioning of objects follow a more personal logic, providing maps of the collector's mind, which—although also intended for the visitor—reflect a more intimate "vision of the world" that, still before being realised in the form of an exhibition, already existed in the form of notes, outlines, and other open-ended pieces of writing.

2.1. *Projects that Give Birth to New Images of the Museum*

This section provides a brief summary of the three projects of the museum of interest to us here, selected—as earlier stated—because they illustrate the strategic choice of the museum's management to open its doors to audiences that are strongly participatory in terms of the time they spend on-site, their interpretation of the exhibits, and creation of new images of the museum. Thus, the distinctive characteristics of all three projects include: total openness towards the other actors involved: i.e., schools, young artists, cultural associations, and the broader community; co-construction of the projects themselves, from the concept design stage through defining the operational steps, allowing great freedom to the project partners while remaining faithful to the museum's cultural identity.

With regard to design, the museum's approach has been informed by the thinking of Bruno Munari in his book "Nothing comes from nothing. Notes for a methodology of design" [9], which advocates a creative design perspective with a constant focus on verifying feasibility and practical

outcomes. From an educational perspective, the project partners drew on Italian and international action-research [10–12] and action-research-training [13,14] traditions. In the case of schools specifically, such approaches to designing and planning the project allow them to include the museum's cultural assets in their annual teaching-learning programs and tie them in with key educational themes chosen and, more importantly, co-constructed with the children. The museum and its collection were experienced as an ever-evolving image with the capacity to accommodate children's and teachers' individual images of them, so as to construct meanings shared between adults and children, between an "inside the school" and an "outside, in the museum and in the surrounding environment" (in a geographical spatial sense, but also in terms of historical time), throughout a project that has generated a vast number of paths to be potentially travelled together. Once again, the objects in the museum, so present and so laden with meaning, were key to the construction of a plurality of knowledge. The following is a brief description of the core aspects of the three projects, which are first introduced in the words of the Museum's Director, Mario Turci.

Three Projects

Project with IC Collecchio

The ultimate aim is to construct a "permanent" project design framework within which to develop educational, training and ongoing professional development programmes. The goal of the current experimental project was to develop a teaching-learning path that combined anthropology (perspectives on the human person) and contemporary art (reflections and expressions) to yield a "pedagogy of contemplation" [38-39]. The main pillars of this project were training and design.

"Guatelli contemporaneo" Project

The educational workshops conducted under the auspices of the "Contemporary Guatelli" project were likewise designed to explore the close relationship between anthropological and art-based approaches to "contemplating" humankind in the everyday. The presence of resident artists at the Museum, the organization of sessions for teachers, and a co-design approach were the project's key features.

IC Lesignano Project

The shared design and construction of a "community museum". Based on close collaboration among the museum, local authorities, witnesses to memory, teachers, and experts, the aim of this project is to elicit reflection on themes of local identity as a basis for getting the school (students, teachers, outside experts) to design the museum. Hence, the outcome may truly be termed a community museum. Once the museum has been completed, it will continue to be curated by the project partners.

3. A Look at Museum Education

Now that we have entered the Ettore Guatelli Museum and learnt something about the work of this special place under the wise guidance of its director, let us consider what past and current research in the fields of museum and art education has to offer.

Both Italian and international studies, whether museological [15–18], museographic [19,20], educational or relative to museum education in particular [21–29] have long tended to emphasize the value of shared interpretation and direct participation in the construction of thinking about heritage [30,31].

Indeed, there has been a shift from a single idea-image in which all the knowledge of a given museum is deposited, and which is interpreted and communicated by its custodians (scholars, directors, managers and curators), to a process of enquiry that allows a polyphony of images to be developed, images that will vary as a function of who is involved and the experience they have been offered. This does not mean that anything goes, or that there is no longer any reference to a cultural framework: on the contrary, it implies gradually developing in-depth knowledge of the cultural heritage asset in question and continuously relating to its audiences, in such a way as to ensure that these particular cultural objects and the complex organic museum system that holds them can fulfil their maximum potential.

3.1. *Coming Back to the “Guatelli Contemporaneo” Project*

To more fully explore this widely adopted interpretative approach, which fosters the creation of multiple images of a museum, or of multiple, previously concealed, perspectives on it, we may usefully return to the “Guatelli contemporaneo” project [32] to discuss it and its operationalization in more detail.

The key feature of this project was its involvement of young contemporary artists, in this case: Giacomo Gerboni and Matteo Sclafani, who spent some months on a residency programme at the museum, which allowed them to experience it in an unusually intense and intensive way. Their almost daily presence at the museum, along with specially designed guided tours, interviews, explorations, laboratories, and research brought new, previously invisible, categories to light. Indeed, the museum’s significant cultural patrimony, like that of many other museums, carries within itself, the potential to generate multiple readings and interpretations. Giving young artists from a strikingly different cultural background access to the content and form of this heritage, as well as to the distinctive space that holds it, for significant stretches of time, gave birth to a series of new images that in turn prompted the organizing of a contemporary art exhibition. “Spells for sharp-cornered objects” was the title of this outcome, the visible manifestation of the process of enquiry carried out by the young artists. This exhibition was held at the Villa Soragna Cultural Center, Collecchio (Parma) from 15 October to 19 November 2016, and was curated by Stefani Cognata. The work that went into the exhibition itself was that of a craftsman, given that site-specific works were directly installed in Villa Soragna for the occasion. The objects of the “Guatelli”, subject to new and diverse readings and uses, and in some cases even temporarily transferred to the site of the art exhibition, allowed new “things” to flourish, whereby the old and the contemporary continued to cross-contaminate each other, at the material, instrumental, technological or more abstractly at the intuitive level of thoughts and connections. The residence program was experienced as a sort of relay among the two young artists’ predecessor, the artist Mirco Marchelli, and the new trio of artists Aurora Biancardi, Mimi Enna and Venetian Cosimo, who won places on the 2017 edition and will exhibit the works born of their enquiry at the Museum Guatelli on 23 September in “Contemporary Guatelli—art, words and objects”. A further interesting outcome was the knock-on effect of the workshops for children held by the artists Gerboni and Sclafani at their exhibition. In a sort of game of Russian dolls, the original input of Ettore Guatelli, with his creations, collections and installations, became a stimulus that was transformed and magnified, changing with each passage. A version of Chinese whispers in which the players never lose their connection with the original word, but use and transform it, making it increasingly more contemporary. Images that give birth to new images, which in turn create new representations, open to all audiences.

These everchanging perspectives bring to light the transformations, the new implications that can flow from cultural heritage when dialogue is grasped as an opportunity and when the ensuing relationships and narratives are heard [33,34]. Furthermore, inviting the young artists to the Guatelli Museum as residents served to attract a different audience, which would otherwise have been unlikely to visit this space. Different audiences came into contact with one another and exchanged perceptions without any of them claiming exclusive authorship or demanding the last word.

A further strategic choice on the part of the museum has been to avoid remaining isolated, by actively seeking to work in collaboration with universities, local institutions, schools, associations, and individuals, creating networks that again offer new perspectives and prompt continuous reflection and exchange of views.

3.2. *The Guatelli Museum and Projects with Schools*

As emphasized by the director of the museum, Mario Turci, among the projects presented here—all of which are aimed at sharing the cultural patrimony of the Guatelli and its possible interpretations with the general public—two key programmes are those based on the museum’s relationship with schools. Working with schools, both local and far away, has always been a core aspect of the Guatelli’s mission, not only because this is among the aims of all contemporary museums, but also because the origin and nature of this particular museum contains great

educational potential it itself, in the noblest sense of the term. As regards the museum's origins, it should be recalled that Ettore Guatelli was a himself a teacher, who discovered objects as a resource for teaching, and was ahead of his time in linking his work in the classroom to material objects, thus transformed into learning contents. He bore witness to this fact in a recorded interview: "When I started out as a teacher, I didn't know where to begin. Who would have taught you how to teach? [...] I realised the educational power of these objects, especially with children, and the prestige that they conferred on you [the teacher]. [...] So, then I had come to appreciate, albeit vaguely, the value of things in education and teaching. You study, you study, all theory and you don't actually see anything!" [35] This line of teaching practice which stems from things, as theorized by Guatelli, informs the two schools projects mentioned earlier. A key operating guideline in both cases has been to avoid viewing the museum as a place to visit once a year, separate from overall teaching-learning programmes, but to see it as interrelated with the rest of the syllabus. The schools' annual education plans now feature: a joint training programme for teachers and museum staff, based on taking concrete objects as a stimulus for reflection; interdisciplinary learning projects based on objects from the museum alongside objects from contemporary everyday life. The museum thus offers itself as a concrete cultural object to be explored, experienced, studied, and even changed.

3.3. *The Guatelli Museum and Methods and Poetics of the Narrative*

Among the developments of the collaboration between the Guatelli Museum and the University of Milan-Bicocca, there is a collaboration on the narrative stage and about the appreciation of the poetics of memory. In this direction, an alliance was built in the course of the Continuing Education in Science, Methods and Poetics of the Narrative, which chose among the training opportunities offered by the Museum of Ozzano Taro a philosophically and anthropologically evocative and fertile declination: from the finding that one of the goods that this museum contains and which can reveal and offer is the recovery of an intangible value represented by stories, testimonies of those objects possessed, respired, lost. What happens, visiting Guatelli Museum is the meeting with the proximity and together the otherness of things. From an apprenticeship point of view and from a narrative-linguistic point of view, the alterity of those objects is not recognized through intellectual knowledge processes or reasoning, but by an engagement that moves through the two dimensions of charm and confidence.

"Recognizing something as an object means standing in front of it, staying fascinated, captured, giving it credit, in some ways falling in love. There could not be a solidified reality in the subject, with that kind of transparent vulnerability having the objects, unless there was a kind of love for reality." [36].

In this sense, language can regain its thauma, its marvel, its ability to say things again and again. "Language encounters objects as an objectum", and this poses as an element that challenges the subject and its language to question its narrative and meaning possibilities.

Transforming objects into "things" involves language, which transforms them into motives, into objects in which they deposit and have deposited affective, intellectual, cultural meanings.

Educating and narrating [37] allows training practices in order to include things not as objects outside us, but as the elements we intend to—have profound links with.

This allows us to renew, through the language that meets the objects, the love for the world.

4. Conclusions

This paper has offered a brief reflection on projects launched by the Guatelli Museum with a view to sharing its cultural patrimony with as wide a public as possible, adapting its strategies as appropriate to facilitate the participation of new audiences in an ongoing process of shared reflection. Without limiting itself to offering a unique interpretation of itself, guided visits only intended to be listened to, or catalogues based on only one interpretative framework, the museum has taken on the challenge of creating authentically participatory projects and instruments, and thereby of fostering a true sharing of views. The different images of the museum that can emerge

from these initiatives represent an enrichment and an opportunity, for all those who work in the museum or visit it, to acquire new perspectives.

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