

COMMENTARY

Communities, Values and the “New” Museology at MuŻA

A reply to Sandro Debono's “*MuŻA – Rethinking National Art Museums and the values of community curation*”

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Introduction

Sandro Debono's “*MuŻA – Rethinking National Art Museums and the values of community curation*” (published in the *Malta Review of Educational Research* in December 2014) makes many promising claims in articulating Heritage Malta's new Museum of Art project (MuŻA). I decided to write this reply after I was asked to join a discussion about the paper on academia.edu but found the format of an online discussion inadequate to deal with the issues I felt the paper needed to address. I hope that by conjoining with Debono's conversation in an essay form, this response will help refine MuŻA's ambitious objectives by critically engaging the guiding vision driving the new Museum. The orientation of my reply is derived from a number of perspectives; Professionally, I speak as a contemporary artist who has practiced in Australia, Holland, Germany, as well as Malta; I speak as a Resident Academic and educator of contemporary art and culture (including museology) at the University of Malta; I speak too as an art researcher and cultural theorist working both within and beyond the academy; I speak as an occasional curator and exhibitions/performance organiser; And I speak as an ordinary citizen, a Maltese-Australian expat presently residing in Malta who has more than a passing interest in Maltese art and culture.

There are two basic themes in Debono's paper I want to discuss. The first is the underlying assumptions guiding the project, the notion of a “National Museum” and the reference to “the *muses*” from whom the Museum is supposed to draw its “inspiration”. These are articulated early in Debono's essay and are presented as if there is no need to further debate their relevance or necessity in elaborating further discussions about MuŻA. I challenge these

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assumptions. The second thread concerns the visitors MuŻA wants to attract and the relationship it intends to build with them, what is described as 'community curation.'

The thinking behind these themes needs to be sharpened, refined and reconsidered from a broader set of references that successfully combines current museological theory with the experience and knowledge gained from real day-to-day museum practice. In other words, there needs to be considerably more work put into reconciling the theoretical approaches MuŻA intends to adopt to take fuller and broader account of work-a-day experience in contemporary culture, museology and community development.

The first thing that should be said, however, is that Debono's paper represents a long overdue introduction of ideas around what is commonly referred to as the New Museology. This new museology can be described as an approach to museum curation and direction that seeks to not only consult and include the public's museums address, but to also integrate the museum back into its community so that it becomes an important locus where society continues the conversations it has with itself. New Museology is not new, however, and this approach has been actively pursued by progressive museums all round the world for more than 30 years, particularly in Australia, Canada and the US. Even a cursory review of the experience in New Museological approaches found in Museums in these countries would provide ample material for MuŻA to consider ways about how it intends to develop and implement New Museological strategies. Yet while the impression one gets after reading Debono's paper is full of high-minded ideas, it is low in practical strategies, low in spelling out how aims and objectives are going to be realised. Reinforcing this impression, the paper provides limited reference to museum experience, and when it does, there is no suggestion that the accounts presented are gained from actual site visits – there is no sense that Debono has experienced any of the sites he refers to first hand.

It is not unusual (especially in Malta) for major projects such as this to fail to identify how projected aims, objectives and benefits are going to be realised, just as there is never any information given about how project's performances can be assessed and evaluated.^[1] In what might be described as MuŻA's mission statement, there is not a hint about whether and by what means the aims, objectives, methods and approaches of the project will be accounted for, evaluated, modified and changed if outcomes and outputs fail to meet expectations. In other words, while Debono's essay seeks to radically update Malta's museum practices, it fails to show how he, as MuŻA's Senior Curator and project leader, is going to translate this long overdue, but thus far only theoretical commitment to a more consultative and community focused

Museum into the actual day to day practices undertaken at MuŻA. The failure to do this is nothing short of breathtaking.

I hope this critique will prompt further elaboration and revision of the guiding documents driving the formation of MuŻA. Specifically such revisions and elaborations must show how the Museum is going to identify and deal with “the community” it proposes to foster. Only when MuŻA openly informs its various constituents about how it intends to realise its objectives of actively realising these community/ies participation in MuŻA's day to day practices, can it be said that the Museum is really striving towards these goals. And let it also be said that the primary function MuŻA must perform, if it is to live up to its ambitious new museology, is to provide a site where Maltese society as a whole can have the conversations it needs to have about art, about whatever art is and can be, about whatever art means or might mean, across the range of different communities that exist in Maltese society that incorporates and includes these different communities and their communal expectations. This conversation must both mobilise and involve these various communities who form and comprise the terrain that defines MuŻA's remit as an art museum. Only when MuŻA establishes this critical and yet inclusive space for all those interested in exploring the world through artistic creations will MuŻA truly start to live up to the promises Debono's paper makes. The museological practices at the Museum need to reflect the ideals of Debono's vision, but to achieve this, these practices have to be comprehensively detailed, documented and made publicly available.

Debating Nation, Value, Community, Mythology and Language

I commence with what I take as the three defining principles nominated as premises that underpin and distinguish the new Museum. Early in the paper, Debono states;

MuŻA is an acronym which stands for Mużew Nazzjonali tal-Arti (English translation - National Museum of Art). It also refers to the muses; the mythological figures from classical antiquity inspiring creativity and, in effect, the etymological source of the word museum. MuZA is also the Maltese word for inspiration. [...] All three stand for an interlocking triad of values. (Debono, 2015, 312)

So the concept of a “National Museum”, the Greek mythological term “*muse*”, and the Maltese etymological notion of “*inspiration*” are brought together and laid down as tenets that define the project without further discussion about the appropriateness of these terms, why they have been chosen and who by, or a consideration of the implications they impose on the Museum. And it is in these opening statements that the ideological commitments and historical baggage, whether intentional or not, for the Museum are established. What is more troubling, however, is that, the way the terms are

presented, there is no suggestion that any of the terms of reference might be modified, changed, or abandoned if strong objections are raised either from within the organisation itself, or from the communities MuŻA services. This is so even though Debono himself presents one strong argument to at least omit the word “National” from MuŻA's name when he recites critiques of nationalism.^[2] Yet despite acknowledging this, the term “National” continues to define, prefigure, and predetermine the reception of the new Museum.

The reference to the *Muses* makes it clear that MuŻA claims authority from Greek mythology in what is a curious move that I assume is intended to appeal to the presumed pantheon of European “Civilisation”. Again, there is no explanation given as to why MuŻA needs to situate itself in the imperious Garden of those fictional figures just as there seems little appreciation of how this (a)muse(ing) move binds MuŻA to the phantasmagoria surrounding Ancient Greece.

More importantly, such a move fails to take advantage of the opportunity presented for MuŻA to devise an innovative dialogic space for itself that authenticates and articulates other and alternative narratives about Maltese art, culture and society. Thus even if we accede to an argument that MuŻA attempts an already doomed project of imagining a singular and unified “National” community, the Museum's portrayal of itself as an extension of and reduction to others Imperial discourses – namely that of Greece – overwrites and erases potential differences and authenticity that may exist in Malta's unique place and sets of relationships it has in the world. Rather than recognising and enabling authentic cultural and creative expressions, MuŻA seems intent on continuing to reduce Maltese art to the margins of other “National” and cultural discourses. The only benefit this creates is that it enables MuŻA to situate itself in the Imperialist language games of Museums elsewhere in Europe. However, this continues to position Malta as a marginal outpost in such discourses. The relevance of this anachronistic, tired and outmoded art historical move is at least dubious, if not downright objectionable.

Implicating notions of “community” and “value” (and for a start, I suggest a more plural sense of communities and values is needed) as part of a broader strategy to placate the role of a “National” Museum creates particular challenges, especially when that institution claims to territorialise something as ambiguous and unquantifiable as art. Responding adequately to these challenges requires considerable acts of intelligence, critical thinking and self reflection and must include responses to questions such as; How are various communities defined, who's defining them and whose doing the talking? What values are assumed those communities hold, who/what do the values represent, and who presumes to identify and articulate them? Which sectors, what actors, whose interests, and which constituents of what communities

will the creative(?) artistic(?) works on display reflect and represent? Who and what gets privileged in these discourses, who/what is denied, and how are these made subject to the museological processes being proposed?

A critical approach to “community” and “values” would of necessity avoid totalising these into universal discourses just as it would avoid relying on objective rationalist language games to reduce and eradicate the nuances and differences between these variables and multiples. Instead of “theoretical” proclamations and motherhood statements about “Community Curation”, a critically rigorous approach focuses on detailing how Museum staff are going to achieve the stated aims. This critical self reflexive museology would clearly and openly declare each every aspect of each step of MuŽA's operation, detailing the roles and actual participation of each and every individual and interested party involved so as to clearly indicate the practical measures being taken to realise the inclusion (as well as exclusions) of these different voices as well as to evaluate MuŽA's efforts, its successes and failures. This is the crux of the problem in Debono's paper, and engaging with the topic should include more than just an overt commitment to feel good statements guiding the Museum. Questions about the “hows and whys” are crucially important to answer if Debono's well intentioned attempts to theoretically position MuŽA in contemporary museological practice are to be made real.

Critical Pedagogy as Critical Museology

There is today a strategy which, on the surface, appears to demonstrate a commitment to democracy. This move can be described as an attempt to eradicate elitism and to open contemporary institutions and organisations up, particularly art and cultural institutions, to greater public scrutiny, engagement and involvement. This strategy sometimes gets articulated by populist politicians who appeal to voters by claiming that they will restore ordinary people's views, tastes and agendas to publicly funded institutions such as National galleries or media organisations like the BBC.^[3] The argument to support this move usually goes something like Museum or Gallery “X” is out of touch with ordinary people because it shows provocative work depicting challenging topics such as homosexuality, for instance, or, a national broadcaster must reflect as well as uphold the mores and standards of society concerning abortion. These arguments are not always about giving ordinary people real input into such organisations, however, but rather seek to prevent these organisations from voicing critiques or introducing new ideas or topics for discussion in society. In other words, moves that appear to “empower” ordinary people are sometimes used to shut down the conversations a society can be having with itself. What gets shut out, of course, are minority views, views that challenge existing dominant stances, views that ask people to think about things in new and different ways. Instead of opening a conversation a community might have with itself

about a topic, such moves can act to repress difference and reduce expressions about other ways of thinking and of doing. This is why it is so crucial that an organisation such as MuŻA provides adequate details about who, how, and why different people are going to be “included” (and excluded) and I get sceptical whenever someone starts talking about enabling greater public participation in important public institutions such as museums and galleries, broadcasters, schools, and research institutes unless these proclamations are backed up by significant and precise details about how they intend to do this.

Let me be absolutely clear on this point; I am not arguing against the inclusion of people and communities in the day to day activities of public institutions such as MuŻA. Rather I am calling for a clearly defined and detailed process whereby these “inclusionary” processes are and can be independently evaluated, verified and the organisation held accountable for the work it does, especially by the communities affected by that institution's work. Without publicly documenting and detailing these processes and procedures, MuŻA will fail to fulfil the crucial democratic role it wants to claim of providing “a safe place for unsafe ideas.”^[4] MuŻA can and should aspire to becoming a site where informed intelligent public debates about art and culture take place but MuŻA must not only respond to and represent existing community views, values and already held beliefs and opinions, it must also extend beyond them. This in particular is where the lack of specificity concerning “Community Curation” becomes especially problematic. A critically informed museological practice is adept not only at exposing people to what they already know, it also challenges and extends a community's understanding and appreciation of topics, work, and ideas it has not encountered or understood before. In order to articulate this pedagogical process, MuŻA must have a clear idea of “the communities” it seeks to address as well as acknowledging the limits, nuances, history, and other qualities found in those communities that will direct, determine and/or impede this pedagogical process.

Given the lack of detail in Debono's notion of “the community,” I will now venture some propositions about the potential communities MuŻA can attract and address. I also identify important questions about the nature of these different communities and ask how MuŻA intends to encourage them to participate in the conversations it hopes to host. Part of such an initial community consultation and inclusion process must identify the parameters and limitations this/these community/communities place on the nature of the conversations that can take place. Let me describe some of these in what follows;

- 1) As MuŻA will almost certainly be located in Valletta, can one automatically assume that the first “community” MuŻA can attract will be residents of Valletta itself? If so, what expectations might

Valletta's residents have for a "National Art Museum" and what gets shown in it? Will this community expect MuŻA to represent the values and tastes of the residents of Valletta? What strata of Maltese society do Valletta residents belong to? What investments, interests and concerns do they have? What social capital do they wield? What levels of education, understanding, and acculturation to art do they possess?

- 2) What about school students (and their teachers) studying art, culture, society, and history? Might these not be a specific and important "community" that the museum can address? Given the parameters of the existing art education curriculum, what level of knowledge and sophistication will the discourse these students and teachers of art bring? What knowledge and experience will they have about works of art and art making? Will this refer mostly to historic modes of practice such as Baroque art or Cubism, or will they also be informed in contemporary creative and artistic practices such as performance art?
- 3) What about members of the wider Maltese community interested in art and culture? Should they be part of the conversation? Will that include Maltese migrants living in Australia, for example, or will the conversations taking place at MuŻA confine themselves only to Malta's physical geography? If the answer to this question is the latter, then why not consider Melbourne as an extension of Malta? And if we assume that this wider Maltese constituency should be included as part of the multifaceted "community" MuŻA can address, how will MuŻA take them into account? How will MuŻA assess the various levels of appreciation, understanding and awareness this "community" has of art? How will MuŻA deal with this "community's" "taken-for-granted" knowledge and experience of art? Should it just accept that people in this wider community are far from a homogenised group? If so, how will MuŻA address them? Will MuŻA embrace an idea that part of its job will be to educate the "community", to sensitise it, and to raise its general knowledge, awareness and experience of art, in all its forms and as art today is understood? Or will MuŻA restrain itself to showing more conventional works of art that this community already associates with "Maltese" art, such as Caravaggio or Mattia Preti, followed by some 19th Century Romantic Nazareners? Will there be attempt to further this "community's" understanding and appreciation of the work of artists like Tracy Emmin, Gilbert and George, Robert Mapplethorpe, Louise Bourgeois or Cindy Sherman in order to better situate and understand what informs contemporary Maltese cultural and artistic practice? And what about new initiatives starting to emerge in contemporary art practice, New Media forms, art created through social media, open source and/or creative commons art? How will MuŻA introduce this work to the diverse and unevenly developed

“communities” with whom it speaks? Or will MuŻA choose to ignore the challenges these various communities and their different needs and expectations present?

- 4) What about the artists? Can it be admitted that *the primary* community a National Art Museum should address is the artists it serves? If MuŻA is to genuinely claim to be an art museum of national stature, how can it avoid embracing both the artists of bygone eras as well as living artists today? Will it only be “Maltese” artists it recognises? How will it justify the inclusion of a German artist like Brockdorf while at the same time rejecting the work of a present day artist born in Somalia? Is Maltese art going to be defined by artists who were born and lived their lives in Malta? How will it deal with Australian-Maltese Artists like Bette Mifsud or myself, for instance? What will it do with an artist like Caravaggio? Will it only represent the works of locally trained, locally residing artists or will it include individuals like Ruth Bianco and Vince Briffa who have trained in international institutions? Will MuŻA open channels of communication with contemporary artists so as to deal with their particular needs? Will MuŻA privilege certain kinds of artistic practice such as sculpture and painting over graffiti or conceptual art? What criteria will MuŻA use to make these decisions? How will it justify its selective processes?
- 5) What about minorities like expat ethnic communities who reside in Malta, such as British, French, Libyans, who comprise a significant proportion of the Museum's annual visitors? Members of these groups bring their own often very sophisticated understanding and appreciation of art gained from the art practices in other countries. How will MuŻA respond to their needs for different artistic expressions? Will MuŻA simply ignore the work that interests them simply because it does not have the resources to address them? Or will it just argue that such artistic practices are not in fact Maltese? Who decides what is Maltese? How will this decision be made? Who will take this decision, and will members of these excluded “communities” be invited to actively participate in the processes?
- 6) And what of those sectors of Maltese society who presently do not have an interest in art? Will there be an “outreach” element in MuŻA's understanding of itself? Will it try to foster this absent “community's” interest and grounding in art? Will MuŻA seek to “educate” this “community”?
- 7) Should MuŻA identify and indicate whether it is principally concerned with historical art practices and periods such as Prehistoric, Renaissance and early Modern art such as Baroque and Romantic painting and sculpture, or should the Museum also display difficult and contemporary works in both new and old media, works that may not have yet found wide appreciation in Maltese society? Who will

make this decision? Which “communities” will be invited to participate in this? Will it be a “community” of curators, art historians, managers and accountants? How responsive will this “community” be to unfashionable or unrecognised modes of artistic practice? What positions in the decision making processes will each of these various communities hold in relation to each other. Who wields power?

- 8) What about contemporary researchers and scholars of art, culture and society? Should the Museum embrace the fact that whatever “art” it presents – whether that be prehistoric, medieval, Modern, Postmodern, or contemporary – this is always and also situated in and understood according to present day values and discourses irrespective of whatever art historical and theoretical interpretations are put to mediate each work? How will MuŽA deal with interpretive and historiographical questions? How will MuŽA position itself in the discourses of Empire that it has already bought into? Will there be any attempts to expose audiences to debates about the complex flows and economies of exchange implicated in Empire and colonialism as well as postcolonial critiques of these?
- 9) Almost certainly, however, the greatest single group that will visit MuŽA will be tourists. Given that tourists will be a significant, if not the main contributors to MuŽA's coffers, how will this diverse group be included as a “community”? Will tourists simply be ignored? How might tourists contribute to and alter the sense of “community” MuŽA imagines for itself and how will this inform the curatorial and collecting policies it pursues? How might MuŽA include tourists in the conversations taking place in and through its activities?? Who will make decisions about how to include tourists and how will such decisions be arrived at and then implemented? Who will determine the priorities in decision making processes?

All these communities have a clear and legitimate interest in the business MuŽA claims. And there may be other communities I have not identified who may also wish to have their voices heard. Each will undoubtedly feel they have a right to expect to see themselves reflected in the work MuŽA does. If MuŽA really wants to claim for itself a New Museology of inclusionary “Community Curation,” these communities can and should each expect that there will be space for them to openly and comprehensively participate in and contribute to the life of the new Museum. This is why questions about how the Museum intends to conduct itself must be answered. Debono's paper, significant as it is as a philosophical statement, fails to address or identify any of the foregoing questions or address the problems it must resolve in addressing them. Yet MuŽA must approach all these issues with thoughtful care and diligence as well as successfully solve them if it is to deliver on the promises it is making.

Conclusion

If MuŻA fails to live up to the tasks it now embraces, this progressive well intentioned project will result in increasing dissatisfaction some people feel about the way art and culture are presently dealt with and understood in Maltese society. Far from enabling greater community access and involvement to this important institution, the failure of Debono's project can actually damage and retard the democratisation of Maltese culture. Without urgent attention to the details this reply calls for, Heritage Malta's commitment to the new museological practices it is adopting will be short lived and MuŻA will henceforth return to the outmoded models that represent outdated values and tastes found in conventional cultural institutions. MuŻA will then have only succeeded in restoring itself as a stuffy art museum. Far from becoming a forum where creativity and innovation can be presented and authentically responded to by various communities whose vested interests actually enliven the conversations taking place around art and culture, MuŻA will again reduce art to replicating ideas that are not just out of touch with the realities of the world today, but also far removed from the lives of the communities it claims to stand for.

Disappointingly, Debono's discussion fails to integrate the theory it refers to in the daily practices and actions the proposed Museum will adopt. If MuŻA's aims and objectives are to be realised, it must fully assume a proactive role in the dynamic communities within which it interacts and not retreat behind facades of managerial objectivity and so-called impartiality. To do this, MuŻA must be entirely specific and situate itself in the actual living spaces and inter-subjective realities of the communities it wants to claim and not just the rhetorical and idealised spaces it hopes to capture. Instead of remaining situated in abstract academic discourses where vague theoretical proclamations ignore the fact that it is not what is said about MuŻA that matters, it is how it lives up to the tasks it claims and how it performs them in its actual day to day practices that really counts. I hope this vitally important project will live up to these aspirations.

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[1] This deficiency is evident in many projects in Malta, whether such initiatives originate at the University, Government instrumentalities, or the private sector and industry. The lack of articulation of clearly defined processes and procedures that aim at actualising the aims and objectives of a project means that such projects lack both transparency and accountability and thus lack credibility, for there is never a means to obtain an outside and independent assessment of how such organisations perform and account for the tasks they are charged with doing. This is a subtle but nevertheless virulent form of corruption of public and societal process.

[2] For example, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* comprehensively argues that the formation of the "Nation" always involves acts of totalising and colonising both people and space. To his credit, Debono immediately engages with the issue, at least in theory, and seems have a grasp of the problems involved. National institutions, Debono acknowledges, are by their very nature an act of naming and imposing unity over something that cannot or should not be totalised or unified. Debono appears to acknowledge that the impulse to name something "National" always relies on creating something one imagines or wants to imagine to be real – a defined people occupying a bordered space. The project of imagining "Nation" is both a positivistic and modernist project and is deeply implicated in the rise of the Nation-State. Yet, as Foucault has argued, the formation of the modern Nation-State always and inevitably involves a reduction and standardisation of people and places to a set of assumed qualities and parameters combining a comprehensive though usually unarticulated sets of exclusions utilising (certain kinds of) language games and taken for granted habits and beliefs about appropriate forms of expression, culture and identity, and the (re)production and projection of idealised images and representations. Yet in spite of his awareness of this critique, Debono fails to integrate this criticism into the core of his vision for the Museum or correlate it with how MuZA intends to address this problem. A more rigorous consideration of the critique would necessarily cross-examine the formation of this new institution and demand that unless there is just cause for making such a claim, the name is better abandoned. Sadly there is no indication or strategy suggesting how the critique of Nationalism is going to be engaged with so as to counter any tendencies visitors might form that implicates its activities as part of a broader Nationalist discourse defining "Malta". I cannot avoid concluding that without a real plan of how this critique is being practically integrated into MuZA's everyday practices, Debono is only paying lip service in what appears to be a transparent attempt to placate such criticisms. Instead we are asked to take the critique of "National" at face value as if the mere act of stating the argument automatically avoids the problem.

[3] While my point here refers to publicly funded institutions, it is important to recognise that MuZA, which is part of Heritage Malta, is actually a private company albeit owned by the Maltese Government. This is yet another issue here that really calls for urgent attention and should be fleshed out if the issues underlying the formation of MuZA are going to be fully considered. However, for the sake of brevity, I have not to discussed the contradiction created when a private profit oriented private company or corporation seeks to fulfil a role that is, in my view, only really able to be performed by a not-for-profit public institution. There is a problem created when a private company wants to make a financial profit out of its activities and decides to foster an organisation that tries to also be community focused, such as Debono is proposing with MuZA. The conflict of interest arises when the company, in its pursuit of financial profit, must deny or act in ways that are against the best interests of the community. Debono again fails to indicate how he intends to resolve this problem or even to recognise that there might be a conflict of interest here at all.

[4] I would like to thank Peter O'Neill, former Director of the Orange Regional Gallery and the Wollongong City Gallery and now proprietor of Cultural Consulting, for taking time to engage with me on this topic and for suggesting this description of the social role a contemporary art museum plays.