

Museums, credible actors of sustainable development ?

17 February 2022 - 6-9 pm

On digital platform

"Let's face it: museums have not yet made their ecological revolution. So should we stop making exhibitions? No, of course not, but it might be time to change certain practices, for example by favoring short-circuit loans of works or by recycling scenographic elements, because if it is cool in museums, it might one day start to heat up for them"¹.

That's what we read in L'Œil magazine, just two years ago. Fortunately, among the critical observers of museums, some see today, between *"museum and ecology, a major turning point! The ecological transition is on its way: for a long time pointed the finger, cultural institutions are working to reduce their carbon footprint"*².

The pandemic, indeed, marked a turning point. As soon as the first closures took place in May 2020, several museum directors wrote to express their desire to put an end to "productivism", to the rapid turnover of exhibiting works with a long history of transportation, and to recall that many museum teams had not waited for the health crisis and the lessons of virtue to act. The discourse became very audible, as all professionals, in a shared movement of *resilience*, aspired to take their part in the *reconstruction* of the museum *of tomorrow*, responsible and sustainable. At ICOM France, a cycle of debate on a platform, hastily put together and efficiently conducted, bears witness to this desire for change, emanating from all the actors of all the museums, large and small³. Led by professionals, this debate has also found its true scope and does not focus on exhibitions, the most visible activity for the general public, but not the only one concerned by the issue of eco-responsibility: transportation, air conditioning of reserves, and even travel of the public ... are to be taken into account in their carbon footprint!

The climatic disasters of the summer of 2021 have accelerated the sense of urgency, in the face of which a large-scale mobilization was required. Sustainable development has come to the forefront, in the broadest sense of the 2030 Agenda: building an economically and socially viable *society*. Museums understood that they could be key players. ICOM had already, at its September 2019 General Assembly, adopted the resolution "Sustainable Development and the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Transforming our World"⁴. This program, established by the UN in 2015, and signed by the majority of member states during the Paris Agreements, includes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation and aim for prosperity, peace and justice...⁵ ICOM invites its member museums to follow this path. A working group (Working Group on Sustainability) was created in September 2018 to provide methodological support.

In turn, we at ICOM France decided, in mid-2021, to contribute to this mission and to involve our members in it: we launched a questionnaire and formed a group of volunteers, aware of the issues or already involved in concrete actions in their institutions. The response was strong as early as August. It

allowed us to identify numerous experiences and organizational practices, which it quickly became clear that we should share, enhance and enrich.

This is the first objective of the February 17 evening debate.

The second objective is forward-looking: what part do museums have to play, beyond the adoption of virtuous practices, in collectively contributing to the objectives of the 2030 Agenda?

Robert Janes in "*Museums in perilous times*" puts it this way:

*"In addition to their deep view of time, museums are eminently qualified to address climate change for a variety of reasons. They are grounded in their communities and are expressions of locality; they are a bridge between science and culture; they bear witness by assembling evidence and knowledge, and making things known; they are seed banks of sustainable living practices that have guided our species for millennia; they are skilled at making learning accessible, engaging and fun, and last, they are some of the most free and creative work environments in the world"*⁶.

At the G20 meeting on Culture in Rome last summer, the President of ICOM - only two NGOs were invited, including ICOM, and his intervention was included in the final declaration - positioned museums as key actors as some of the most *credible* institutions.

The responsibility of museums, because of their *credibility*, is to act to inform and convince their visitors, to influence their perceptions and behavior. How is this integrated today in the design of future exhibitions and associated cultural programming? The debate has no borders and museums form a very dense worldwide network, structured for three-quarters of a century by ICOM, which can have a strong impact if efforts converge. Professionals from all over the ICOM network will be invited to testify and present their projects. Some are already designing museums entirely dedicated to "environmental issues, sustainable development and possible solutions" (New York's *Climate Museum*, created in 2016), many are working on new presentations.

Finally, we will examine, with the INP, the training mechanisms at work and the challenge of raising awareness among future museum professionals.

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¹ Original version : « *Disons-le franchement : les musées n'ont pas encore fait leur révolution écologique. Alors, faut-il arrêter de faire des expositions ? Non, bien sûr, mais il serait peut-être temps de changer certaines pratiques, en privilégiant par exemple les prêts d'œuvres en circuit court ou en recyclant les éléments de scénographie, car s'il fait frais dans les musées, cela peut un jour se mettre à chauffer pour eux* ». Fabien Simode, « Le mauvais bilan carbone des expositions », *L'Oeil-Le Journal des arts*, 30 septembre 2019. <https://www.lejournaldesarts.fr/medias/le-mauvais-bilan-carbone-des-expositions-par-fabien-simode-sur-tsf-jazz-145882>.

² Mailys Celeux-Lanval, « Musées et écologie : un tournant majeur », *Beaux Arts magazine*, 22 octobre 2021. <https://www.beauxarts.com/grand-format/musees-et-ecologie-un-tournant-majeur/>.

³ Tous les débats peuvent être consultés sur notre site Internet à l'adresse : <https://www.icom-musees.fr/musees-et-resilience>.

⁴ Voir les résolutions adoptées sur le site Internet d'ICOM consacré au groupe de travail sur le développement durable: <https://icom.museum/fr/nos-actions/recherche-et-developpement/developpement-durable-et-local/>.

⁵ Voir la page dédiée l'ONU : <https://www.agenda-2030.fr/17-objectifs-de-developpement-durable/>

⁶ Dans *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Volume 35, Issue 6: Museums and climate action, ICOM, 2020, pages