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## The Museum between Utopia and Paradox

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the phenomenon of the contemporary art museum, defining it as an institution based on paradox. Establishing the link between Utopia and paradox, it discusses three aspects of museums in which this link is obvious. The final part of the text returns to the paradox, and consequently to paradoxical thinking as a precondition for thinking Utopia as well as for imagining an alternative to the existing social reality.

**Keywords:** museum, contemporaneity, paradox, Utopia, political

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### Muzej: med utopijo in paradoksom

**Izvleček:** Prispevek govori o fenomenu muzeja za sodobno umetnost. Avtorica ga predstavi kot institucijo, ki temelji na paradoksu. V nadaljevanju opredeli povezavo med utopijo in paradoksom ter v treh točkah oriše to povezavo na primeru muzejev. V zaključku se spet osredotoči na paradoks in na mišljenje, ki ga zaznamuje paradoks kot predpogoj za zamišljanje utopije in posledično tudi alternative obstoječi družbeni realnosti.

**Ključne besede:** muzej, sodobnost, paradoks, utopija, politično



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## Introduction

When we think about museums, especially museums of contemporary art, we can sense an oddness about them. It is difficult to pinpoint at first, but as soon as we look deeper into this topic, many discrepancies are discovered in the very concept of a ‘museum of contemporary art’. The first major inconsistency is the term itself – a *museum of contemporary art*. The term ‘museum’ describes an institution: uttering the word ‘museum’, we usually envisage a building harbouring and protecting items, protecting them from the outside world and even time. Yet museums are usually connected to the past and meant for the future. Having stated that, we have to bear in mind that the institution itself is based on a modernist premise. A museum is rarely meant for *now*, but that is precisely what a museum of contemporary art is supposed to be: hence the first paradox inherent in its very name. A museum of contemporary art is an impossible concept, a paradoxical concept, since the museum itself is bound to the modernist concept of time. In this concept, ‘time’ refers to the past pointing to the future, a static time, as we might say, instead of reflecting the concept of contemporaneity. Contemporaneity may be considered in terms of enigmatic contemporaneity, which erases the sense of time: this is stated by Johnson, who describes contemporaneity in terms like ‘anti-time’<sup>2</sup> or

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<sup>2</sup> ‘High modernity was the age of grand projects, defined by concepts of Utopia and infinite progress towards it. Postmodernity promised the deconstruction of deterministic, frequently authoritarian, modernist demands, including those of Utopia and progress ... the postmodern offered no viable alternative, only difference and (eventually neo-liberal) pluralism ... The “contemporary” paradigm did not arrive with a grand gesture or master promise. The instituted contemporary might be better characterised as the ruin of the great twin discourses of the last century, and promises nothing – it is without program, an anti-time’ (Johnson, 2014, 43–44).

‘structure free existence’,<sup>3</sup> and by Bishop, who defines two possible models of thinking about contemporaneity: the one which she names presentism<sup>4</sup> comes close to Johnson’s definition, while the other involves a dialectical contemporaneity,<sup>5</sup> a multi-temporal and non-presentist contemporaneity. It is the latter that is to provide the starting-point for further reflection. To recapitulate: on the one hand we have a museum, a static modernist concept, and on the other contemporaneity, a dynamic potentiality of multiple relationships to the past and future. This first paradox engenders still further paradoxes to be discovered within the concept of a ‘museum of contemporary art’. Another example is our contradictory references to the museum: it is described as an ideological, disciplinary institution, but also as a space of free imagination, creativity and emancipation. On the one hand museums are traditional and conservative, on the other they can become cradles of avant-garde thinking. They are perceived as ‘closed’ because they present elitist culture, but they also strive to be open, even open to the masses. They represent the accumulation of capital, but their content is often highly critical of capitalism. This very contradiction brings to the fore a museum’s social and political potentiality. But how to pinpoint this potentiality, how to explore it and make it explicit?

## **The Case Study**

Since 2013 I have been working at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška (Koroška Galerija Likovnih Umetnosti – KGLU), a public regional museum of modern and contemporary art

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking’ (Bishop, 2013, 6).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 9.

based at Slovenj Gradec. What has always intrigued me is the peculiar history of this museum. Founded in 1957, it became in the 1960s a very important institution of culture and art, not only regionally but on a much larger scale. Under the patronage of the United Nations it organised international exhibitions focused on promoting the ideals of the UN, such as world peace, humanity, solidarity, etc. Judging by the archives and documents found within the museum, this was not a museum of the past but a space offering the visitor a glimpse of the future, a better society. It was not meant to preserve something, but to evoke something. In a broader political context, this clear political agenda and the vision of a better future arguably permeated any socialist museum, including the museum of Slovenj Gradec.

To outline its history: the year 1965 saw the first national – Yugoslav – exhibition *Peace, Humanity and Friendship among Nations*. It was organised as an open call to Yugoslav artists to send works on this topic. Encouraged by the response, the organisers decided to make the call international. It was an open call, but artists were directly invited as well and political bodies were engaged to address them. Within a few months in 1966, as many as 240 works arrived at Slovenj Gradec from more than 80 countries. The problem of housing the exhibits was solved by adding 1,500 square metres of exhibition space. With the help of local companies and worker brigades, the construction works for the new gallery were completed in a record-breaking three months. There were altogether four international exhibitions organised under the patronage of the UN at Slovenj Gradec: the first was in 1966, the second in 1975, the third in 1979, and the last in 1985. The documentation shows that the concept was changing and that the strongest impact was made by the first two exhibitions – a fact partly due to the general political situation. It was quite unusual that these exhibitions

took place at Slovenj Gradec, in a small town where the state (Yugoslav) celebrations of the UN were held. The initiator of these exhibitions was a group of intellectuals at Slovenj Gradec, headed by Karel Pečko, the then Museum Director, who was a charismatic visionary with megalomaniac ideas. These endeavours of the museum and the above individuals had political support (and considerably more of it later on, when Tito visited Slovenj Gradec in 1967 and responded favourably to the endeavours of the gallery), but above all the museum was supported by the community.

### **To Paradoxical Thinking**

The first concept that I engaged with while working at the Museum was the concept of heterotopia and thus of Utopia, the realised and unrealised Utopias and Utopian moments glimpsed in the history of this museum, in its archives and collections. This was because I thought about the museum as a heterotopia in Foucault's terms<sup>6</sup> and used it as an analytical tool in Peter Johnson's terms: as '... a tool, a dispositif, to examine, highlight and reflect upon changing cultural and historical relations, functions and effects'.<sup>7</sup> We can determine some obvious connections between the museum and Utopia. But only lately has it become obvious to me that each of these connections contains a paradox. Why is this important? Why is it important to think about the paradox and Utopia?

The abovementioned concept of contemporaneity as presentism, as an enigmatic, all-encompassing *now*, is levelling out the differ-

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<sup>6</sup> 'A kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (Foucault, 1986, 24).

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 2012, 14.

ences in the world and closing the possibility of considering alternatives – and these include alternatives to the existing political, social and economic situation. Jameson talks about the loss of the sense of ‘deep time’,<sup>8</sup> a loss which reduces the possibility of envisaging differences. To think about a museum as a heterotopia, by contrast, may foster awareness of other times and other realities. The paradox at this point is the trigger that points us in the direction of Utopian thinking: according to Kierkegaard, ‘the paradox is the source of the thinker’s passion’ and ‘[t]he supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think’.<sup>9</sup> Given this description, the paradox may well be considered a tool for uncovering Utopia. That is why we are about to outline some basic connections between Utopia, the paradox, and the museum.

### **‘The museum is a Utopian project because it resides on an idea of totality which cannot be realised’**

Since the beginning of the institutional history of museums, which can be traced since the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the museum has been aiming to manifest the wholeness of the world. This is corroborated by the *Wunderkammer* (curiosity cabinet) exhibitions and collections, and later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, by encyclopaedic exhibitions picturing a unified historical narrative. The aiming for totality today is manifested through the idea of a collection encompassing art from everywhere and covering all issues, as well as through the idea that a museum should offer the visitor a totalising

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<sup>8</sup> ‘... when suburbs replace the villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogeneous over all space, then the very sense of an alternate temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without even knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time ...’ (Jameson, 2003, 699).

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, 1962, 46.

experience.

The paradox of this Utopian thought lies in the fact that the museum itself can never be whole: it is always particular. Here we can cite the argument popularly known as the *barber paradox*.<sup>10</sup> To apply this paradox to the museum: the museum cannot be said to contain everything because it cannot contain itself.

### **‘The museum is Utopian because it is based on the elimination of death’**

The objects within the museum should be preserved for eternity, and this eternity defeats death. In an interview with Hort Krüger (1968), Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno point out that the abolishment of death is crucial when we are thinking and talking about Utopia. In their opinion, death is the starkest anti-Utopia because it is unavoidable, a fact. According to Adorno, ‘the identification with death is that which goes beyond the identification of people with the existing social conditions. Utopian consciousness means a consciousness for which the possibility that people no longer have to die does not have anything horrible about it, but is, on the contrary, that which one actually wants.’ The social Utopias of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries disguised this wish to abolish death as an idea of freedom, a freedom to be manifested in just social relations and a peaceful life. But the ultimate form of freedom is exactly the abolishment of death – freeing people from the finality of life.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Consider a group of barbers who shave only those men who do not shave themselves. Suppose there is a barber in this collection who does not shave himself; then by the definition of the collection, he must shave himself. But no barber in the collection can shave himself. (If so, he would be a man who does shave men who shave themselves.)’ *Scientific American*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-russells-paradox/>.

## The Museum and the Utopian Nature of Art

We are above all interested in how it is possible to talk about the museum as a space where alternative forms of consciousness and alternative ways of thinking can be promoted. Today an absolute differentness is difficult to imagine, which makes the idea of an alternative system or alternative way of life ever harder to envisage. Art bears a special potential in this case, for ‘... art functions or can function as one of the possible mind operations revealing in our everyday lives that this world is not everything; that it is something more than and something different from what is shown to us, but at the same time neither more nor different. Art enables us to see that this is not the only possible world to live in.’<sup>11</sup> This description of the role of art comes close to Bloch’s Utopian function of art. But we have to bear in mind that it is not the aim of art to picture or draw Utopias (as it might be understood if we perceive the concept of Utopia in its connection to the literary form), because the more precise the image of Utopia, the more Utopia loses its potential. What exceeds this function of art creates a surplus, Bloch calls it *Überschuss*, because an artwork contains not only an artist’s subjective position but something more, something which has a meaning that goes beyond its meaning at the moment of creation. Bloch states that art and creativity are a reflection of Utopian thinking, which is immanent to all people: ‘Every plan and every creation that was pushed to the limits of its perfection had touched on Utopia and given ... precisely the great cultural works which had a more and more progressive influence, a surplus over and above their mere ideology.’<sup>12</sup> The positive notion of Utopia – unlike its colloquial sense of something imaginary and impossible – refers to an

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<sup>11</sup> Riha, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Bloch, 1996, 156.



imaginative venturing beyond the given, thus inspiring an intention to think through, experiment and realise an existing but latent possibility.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of the above, I propose *the idea that Utopia is the outcome, the manifestation of paradoxical thinking, and that to understand the past and the present better we have to think about it in paradoxes. Indeed, to imagine the future, any future at all, we have to employ the method of paradoxical thinking.*

## Back to the Case Study

Understanding the wider scope of the Koroška Galerija case calls for a survey of the 1960s context.

The context:

- In the 1960s Yugoslavia was one of the leading countries within the non-aligned movement. It represented a third possibility, an approach different from the Cold War bloc arrangement.
- The threat of war was still present and the memory of WWII still very much alive.
- The western world was growing increasingly commercialised, so

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<sup>13</sup> “The specific pre-appearance which art shows is like a laboratory where events, figures and characters are driven to their typical, characteristic end, to an abysmal or a blissful end; this essential vision of characters and situations, inscribed in every work of art, which in its most striking form we may call Shakespearean, in its most terminalized form Dantean, presupposes possibility beyond already existing reality. At all points here prospective acts and imaginations aim, subjective, but possibly even objective dream-roads run out of the Become towards the Achieved, towards symbolically encircled achievement. Thus the concept of the Not-Yet and of the intention towards it that is thoroughly forming itself out no longer has its only, indeed exhaustive example in the social utopias; important though the social utopias, leaving all others aside, have become for the critical awareness of elaborated anticipating’ (Ibid., 15).

artists were seeking for more primal values, and life in small peripheral towns was idealised.

- There was a group of extraordinary individuals headed by Karel Pečko, a man who had visions of accomplishing something at Slovenj Gradec. Together with his contemporaries, he succeeded in mobilising the local population and establishing contacts with the leading intellectuals in Slovenia and Yugoslavia.
- The political message of the exhibitions was extremely popular.

Bearing the above context in mind, we will focus on the international exhibitions organised at Slovenj Gradec under the patronage of the UN and point out their main paradoxes. Those exhibitions were the focus of the media response, but they were likewise accompanied by political manifestations and politicians' speeches. A look at the photos from the KGLU archives suggests that the focus was on the events rather than the exhibitions. There is a lot of material documenting the visits of high-ranking international and national politicians, including Tito, but very few images documenting the exhibition set-up itself. In the light of today's museum practice, which foregrounds the exhibition set-up and the exhibits, this comes as a surprise. It seems as if the exhibition had been only a scenery, a stage for the political theatre. But the more we research the collections and publications of the time, the clearer the background emerges. Several attempts to account for this phenomenon have been made by the staff of the institution as well as by guest curators, researchers and artists. Why was the content of the exhibitions overlooked? Was it boring, too eclectic? We can only venture an assumption: the elite art and art history circles were leery of the Slovenj Gradec exhibitions. A major reason for this scepticism may have been reluctance to put art in such proximity to politics, because what was happening at Slovenj Gradec was most

probably seen as utilitarianisation of art. To a certain extent this is true, but on the other hand these exhibitions were an interesting phenomenon reflecting the contemporary role of art – of socially committed art that pointed towards political problems and pinpointed the hidden issues. What was exhibited at these exhibitions was admittedly eclectic, as is often the case when exhibitions are based on an open call, but it was also art which was truly socially committed. Hence a discrepancy between the content of the exhibitions, their political message, and their communication.

A brief historical overview of the museums established in Slovenia (part of Yugoslavia at that time) after WWII shows another paradox, which applies to the KGLU as well. These museums were mostly founded on bourgeois values – strengthening the national identity, maintaining and protecting the local cultural heritage, promoting art and the development of culture. While the museums acquired mostly modernist artworks for their collections, they retained a socialist institutional status in being the property of the local community. This type of socialist-modernist museum was primarily characterised by openness to the wider public: it was intended to be a people’s museum, to reach out to the working classes, who were not its traditional audience, and to offer them an image of the new socialist society. This already shows a certain discrepancy, a split that marks the institution of the museum in general: vacillation between its traditional role of an ideological institution and its opening up to new practices.

## **Conclusion – a Contemporary Paradox**

The main question is: how do we deal with this past today, what can we draw from these stories, documents, ideas? The political, social and economic context of this particular museum and of museums in general is different today, but again it is a paradoxical one: the

museum is a public institution under capitalism. A possible answer is to define the political dimension of museums. 'Political' in this sense is not a set of rules or methods of running a state: rather, it is the political as defined by Laclau, which partly covers also the political as understood by Rancière. For Laclau, the political is a set of contingent articulations that is limited by the social, by the set of sedimented social practices. The political ceases to be political as soon as the practices become sedimented. But the political is also a space of antagonism which prevents a complete sedimentation of the social practices and a complete hegemony.<sup>14</sup> Similar is the conception by Rancière, who likewise defines the political as something that means the restructuring of the given order.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Mouffe claims that '... artistic and cultural practices are absolutely central as one of the levels where identifications and forms of identity are constituted. One can't make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of a given common sense – and in that sense is political – or contributes to the destruction or critique of it. Every form of art has a political dimension.'<sup>16</sup>

If we project these theoretical models onto the museum and onto the artwork as the barrier of the political, we can identify the antagonism located in the contact between the political of the artwork and the ideological of the museum. The artwork and the content it brings to the museum throws the museum off balance, deprives it of the total hegemony which could be achieved. As a consequence, the museum cannot become whole: there is a crack. The museum as an institution is in continuous articulation. One may conclude

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<sup>14</sup> Laclau, 2006, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, 2005, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Mouffe et al., 2001, 99–100.

at this point that since the museum is both defined and opened up by its object, the artwork, there is a political dimension to it as well. The other side of the museum is the ideological side, which closes the museum up and offers a certain fixed position within society. Here this logic of paradox comes close to the idea of antagonism as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, according to whom antagonism is constitutive of the social fabric. We propose that paradox is integral to Utopia and actually the trigger of antagonistic forces. From this paradox comes the potential to disrupt the smooth fabric of capitalism and the logic of sameness. To rephrase Kierkegaard: through the paradox we want to think something, something which can be different from the established forms and modes of thinking – and this is the potential.

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