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A Teddy Bear in the Minotaur's Labyrinth, or Changing the Paradigm. *The "Anything Goes" Museum*. Exhibition Curated by Children at the National Museum in Warsaw

Dürer's drawing depicting a stag head pierced by an arrow and an ornamented human skull from the Solomon Islands; Christian Boltanski's hangman's shadow and Hokusai's light spectre Oiwa-san; a mummified head from Peru and Annette Messager's head, spiky with sharp pencils, sown from gloves; Fremiet's famous sculpture titled *Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman* and a Tibetan statuette of the many-armed god Samvara, copulating with Vajravarahi – dozens of such startling juxtapositions were presented at the *Carambolages* exhibition in the Grand Palais in Paris in spring 2016.[1] Fascinating for some, irritating for others, and intriguing for everyone, the exhibition might not have been the first, but it certainly was the most effective show to intentionally and ostentatiously reject the structural order imposed by museums and art history. Any order: chronological, territorial, genre-based, stylistic, axiological and aesthetic – as the title *Carambolages* ("collisions") provocatively announced .

Questioning the spatiotemporal, linear layout of museum exhibitions is by no means a new idea. Jean-Hubert Martin, curator of the Paris exhibition, recalled the 1960s and the discussion that took place during a seminar conducted by Marshall McLuhan (famous theoretician of media communication), with the participation of artists, philosophers and museum experts.[2] The museums' obsessive attempts to construct a complete and continuous historical narrative, disrespect for the spectators' independence and imposing on them certain pre-existing models, wrongly understood education, oculocentrism, disregarding the ambiguity of works of art and their interrelations in the museum space, inability to enter into an intercultural dialogue, the ludic character of museums – according to Martin, those issues, brought to attention 50 years ago, have not since been taken up in museum activity.[3]

[1] *Carambolages*, sous la direction de Jean-Hubert Martin, exh. cat., Galleries Nationales du Grand Palais, 2016, vol. 1–3 (Paris, 2016).

[2] Marshall McLuhan, Harley Parker, Jacques Barzun, *Explorations of the ways, means, and values of museum communication with the viewing public*, proceedings of a seminar held on October 9 and 10, 1967, at the Museum of the City of New York (New York, 1969); French translation: *Le musée non-linéaire. Exploration des méthodes, moyens et valeurs de la communication avec le public par le musée*, traduction, introduction et notes par Bernard Deloche et François Mairesse (Lyon, 2008).

[3] Jean-Hubert Martin, "Beautés dés-ordonnées & décloisonnement," in *Carambolages*, op. cit., pp. 24–27.

The Parisian curator's rhetorical fervour belongs to the age-old and abundant anti-museum and anti-academic discourse. It would not be difficult to dispute with him,[4] especially since Martin's introduction to the display mentions numerous attempts at creating exhibitable collisions, aimed at crushing museum axioms, including the chronological order. Jean-Hubert Martin himself – a curator of great, albeit controversial reputation – has organized famous, intercultural exhibitions, such as the "textbook"[5] *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris, 1989),[6] considered to be decisive for the post-colonial discourse and instrumental in overcoming the Eurocentrism of museum exhibitions. In the introduction to *Carambolages*, Martin refers to historical pioneers whose actions justify the current exhibition practice. Firstly, he mentions early modern cabinets of curiosities – collections not only of natural *mirabilia*, but also of unusual man-made artefacts, where all the specimens were arranged in many different ways.[7] The author sees their natural continuation in private collections and museums, not only those founded before the "art history period," but also contemporary ones.[8] He admits that there are and there have always been collectors possessed by the "desire of the whole,"[9] subject to the pressure of "completeness," which would make it possible to create a historical, thematic or genre-based compendium of the collection being assembled. However, there also are "author's" collections, chaotic and eclectic (especially if they are the fruit of a scientist's or artist's passion), not assembled according to a reasoned and methodically realized plan.[10] They are governed by intuition, emotions, whims, preferences, surprises, personal taste, associations, sentiments, memories, the desire to own something extraordinary, hoarding manias, sympathies and antipathies – motivations far from the systematic rules of "collection building."

The assumptions of the *Carambolages* exhibition, although not as innovative or revolutionary as the authors describe them, distinctly illustrate current exhibition trends and, to some

[4] Martin's essay intentionally (because one would not accuse the author of ignorance) omits the contemporary theoretical museum discourse and does not discuss current transformations of museum institutions. I do not mention this text in order to start a dispute, but to outline the context of *The "Anything Goes" Museum* exhibition, for which the concurrent *Carambolages* exhibition may be an instructive point of reference.

[5] See Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900. Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, 2nd edition (London, 2011), chapter *1980–1989*, pp. 661–665, includes critical opinions about the exhibition, such as artist Barbara Kruger's.

[6] Jean-Hubert Martin, Thomas Mc Evilley, *Magiciens de la terre*, exh. cat, Centre Georges Pompidou and Grande Halle Parc de la Villette (Paris, 1989). The exhibition, which combined Western and "other" art in equal proportions, is still mentioned in discussions concerning neo- and post-colonialism. On the 25th anniversary of the exhibition Tate Modern organized a series of shows entitled *Magiciens de la terre: Reconsidered*, curated by: Lucy Steeds, George Clark, Tate Modern, London 2013/2014.

[7] See Victor I. Stoichita, *Ustanowienie obrazu. Metamalarstwo u progu ery nowoczesnej*, translated by Katarzyna Thiel-Jańczuk (Gdańsk, 2011), especially chapter VI, parts 3 and 5: *Pamięć i zapomnienie w gabinetach kolekcjonerów* and *Historia sztuki i system wyobrażeń*, pp. 141–77. The author suggests that the "Carthesian breakthtrough" marked the beginning of the "systemic" model of exhibition.

[8] For instance, the contemporary art collection in the Château d'Oiron, arranged to resemble a renaissance cabinet of curiosities. Jean-Hubert Martin, Jean Guillaume, Frédéric Didier, *Château d'Oiron et son cabinet de curiosités* (Paris, 2000).

[9] Krzysztof Pomian, *Zbieracze i osobliwości. Paryż–Wenecja XVI–XVIII wiek*, translated by Andrzej Pieńkos (Warsaw, 1996), pp. 71–78 (several re-editions). The works of Krzysztof Pomian were crucial to recognizing collections as independent entities and an autonomous subject of research.

[10] Dario Gamboni, " 'Musées d'auteur': les musées d'artistes et de collectionneurs comme ouvres d'art totals," in *Tra universo privato e spazio pubblico: Case di artisti adibite a museo / Zwischen privatem Kosmos und öffentlichem Raum: Künstlerhaus-Museen*, Gianna Mina, Sylvie Wuhrmann, eds (Berne, 2011), pp. 188–204. *Casa d'artisti*, Quaderni del Museo Vela, 5. "Comprehensive material on collections in artists' houses," in Andrzej Pieńkos, *Dom sztuki. Siedziby artystów w nowoczesnej kulturze europejskiej* (Warsaw, 2005).

extent, museum trends. Namely: to collect and juxtapose art from all around the world, avoiding technical and chronological categorization; to substitute chronological linearity with any other, random linearity – alphabetical order of titles, arrangement by size, a narrative, where each work represents one word, thematic rearrangement, etc. The order of objects would result from their own specific qualities, each object being announced by the previous object, and announcing the next one – this rule of associations is observed throughout the whole exhibition.[11] The spectator is allowed the freedom of creating his own stories and connections.

To what extent do those ideas apply to *The "Anything Goes" Museum* exhibition, shown at the same time in the National Museum in Warsaw?[12] The exhibitions were created by six groups of curators, identified by colours (red group, green group, etc.) and composed of six children aged 6–14. Each group prepared their own exhibition. The young and sometimes very young curators, who were charge of the complete organization of the display – from selecting works of art, creating scripts and set design ideas to recording audio guides and preparing educational materials – had the entire heterogeneous resources of the Museum storage at their disposal.[13] The objects were chosen from all of the Museum's collections: ancient art, early Christian art, Oriental art, decorative arts, ceramics and glassware, medals, photography, textiles. The children naturally penetrated the collections of Polish and European painting, the sculpture collection, the collection of prints and drawings and the modern art collection. Therefore, the exhibition brought together Tibetan statuettes, ancient oil lamps, 19th-century stereoscopic photographs, ball dresses from the interwar period, slippers that belonged to a famous artist, paintings by Matejko and Malczewski, an Egyptian sarcophagus of a cat, Picasso's ceramic plates, a mummified ram, a porcelain piggy, a Fabergé brooch, Greek vases, a film-star portrait of Pola Negri, a flag of Vilnius girl scouts, a rhyton in the shape of a giraffe's head, a Russian icon, the contemporary sculpture *Bombowniczka* [*Bomber Woman*], a worn-out teddy bear ennobled by a museum showcase, or a marble swan. This list could go on, and, given its surreal meetings "on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella," it may seem close to the "collisions" from the Grand Palais in Paris. In both cases we saw startling combinations of objects liberated from academic and museum classifications. However, is it justifiable to compare the Parisian blockbuster exhibition prepared by the renowned curator with a museum experiment that engages children? Not entirely free from doubt, pointing at obvious parallels, I do not intend to follow the similarities – on the contrary, I want to list the fundamental differences that contribute to the value and extraordinariness of the Warsaw exhibition.

Firstly, the starting point was completely different. The key idea was to have the children in charge. "One does not have to know art history. Pleasure is derived from putting works of art together, while travelling through time and space" – as the creator of the Paris exhibition

[11] Martin, op. cit., p. 29.

[12] *The "Anything Goes" Museum*, National Museum in Warsaw, February–May 2016. Exhibition curated by children. Concept: Agnieszka Morawińska. Apart from the exhibition catalogue, the seminar *Jak to się stało, że „W Muzeum wszystko wolno"?* (NNW, April 18, 2016) was also a valuable source of information. Professor Antoni Zięba's lecture *What Are Old People Allowed To Do in the Museum?* was an academic attempt at confronting the idea of the exhibition with the methodological trends and attitudes of 19th century and modern art history. Considering this review, I shall limit myself to outlining the context of the exhibition in the light of some products of those tendencies. The *Carambolages* exhibition seems especially representative.

[13] Anna Kiełczewska, Bożena Pysiewicz, "Czy w Muzeum naprawdę wszystko wolno, czyli o procesie przygotowania przez dzieci wystawy w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie," in *W Muzeum wszystko wolno*, book concept: Maria Bukowska i Anna Kiełczewska (Warsaw, 2016), pp. 243–46.

advertised his work.[14] In fact, the "collisions" were a most *recherchée* exhibition – literally and figuratively. The curator rightly mentioned the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities. The exhibition resembled an enormous *cabinet d'amateurs*, where the "amateurs" had almost unlimited (also financial) access to public and private collections on several continents. The show was the fruit of great intercultural and interdisciplinary erudition, a narcissistic display of knowledge of the bizarre, esoteric, exotic and unknown. This erudition (or so it seems)[15] was ousted in favour of the "liberation of works of art from the cage of art history" – as the advertising leaflet went. The "liberation" rhetoric dominated all the texts that promoted the exhibition.

However, the junior-curators brought into the National Museum in Warsaw did not have to reject or pretend anything. They drew real pleasure from the journey through time and space – and through the museum's storerooms. They found things, but were not looking for anything.[16] They discovered, but did not speculate. Therefore, their actions had a different direction: not rejection or destruction of the existing system of ideas or the scientific order, but an inadvertent freedom from this order. Not the sophistication of post-modern subtlety, sensitive to the "other," but an unfettered play of imagination and fantasy – in a word: fun.

In spite of the many similarities, the two exhibitions had different purposes. According to Sylvie Hubac, chairwoman of the Réunion des musées nationaux: "*Carambolages* invites us to rethink our traditional attitude to art, to reject the temptation of hierarchization and cultural classification and to simply open up to emotions that can awaken our inner artists [...] one has to agree that art, before it becomes an intellectual exercise, is first and foremost a bold, intuitive and poetic meeting of the spectator and the work of art. The aim of *Carambolages* is to make this meeting ludic and having nothing to do with codes which we got used to in museums."[17]

Consistently, the *Carambolages* exhibition was not meant to have any leitmotiv. The spectator was given complete freedom of interpretation. "Everyone will find what they want, if they listen to their hearts."[18] There were no captions explaining the objects. The display, however, was not completely random. Basing on associations, it matched the works into corresponding pairs, creating a sequence of diptychs (highlighted in the catalogue which has the form of a superb fold-out screen). The discovery of the paths and sense of those associations (which were often shocking, but never absurd or unjustified) was left to the spectator's perceptiveness and intelligence – not knowledge. To meet the challenge and find the thread that connects them was undoubtedly very satisfying, and the element of surprise only added to the pleasure. The idea of participation and playfulness was realized by supplying the audience with magnetic boards on which they could pair reproductions of the works as they pleased. It was also possible to play an association card game, moderated by an educator.

One might say that the ideas of the young curators were more traditional. They did choose the objects in a free and "intercultural" manner, but they clearly emphasized that they wanted to create a "proper" exhibition. A solid, well thought-out construction, not deconstruction. As there were six groups, they created six unrelated thematic or problem exhibitions. The

[14] Martin, op. cit., p. 30.

[15] Seemingly, because the luxurious catalogue in the form of a *livre-objet* was accompanied by an annex containing notes that fulfilled all the museum requirements, along with an academic commentary.

[16] *Carambolages* were the result of an extensive query in several dozen museums and private collections, as can be seen from the impressive list of loaned items.

[17] Sylvie Hubac, "Preface," in *Carambolages*, op. cit., [s.p.].

[18] Ibid.

"collisions" revealed secret relationships between ideas and objects that were very distant in terms of time and space (contrary to the title, these were indeed relationships rather than collisions). The thematic fields outlined by the children, on the other hand, allowed to reveal completely new meanings of museum artefacts. Decontextualization was not a methodological assumption, but rather a natural and obvious outcome of the change of approach to the museum resources. Academically speaking – what happened, was a complete change of paradigm.

The first exhibition was titled *A Forest*, because "we haven't seen an exhibition about a forest yet."[19] However, the forest here did not mean sylvan landscapes, but animals that inhabited it, such as, for instance, snails (with the pattern of pink leaves, as seen on the painting by Mikulski), snakes (Wawrzeniecki's monstrous constrictors), harpies (Malczewski, obviously), cats (a mummy), the Hindu god Ganesha with his elephant trunk, a couch pekingese, a Saxon porcelain swan, a hedgehog made of nails... A zoologist might have his doubts concerning this forest fauna, but not only art history classifications were disregarded here.

Eventually it turned out that the Museum was swarming with animals, questioning the unwavering conviction that European art was anthropocentric. Minotaur's animal nature inspired the exhibition titled *Dance of the Minotaur*, which required building a labyrinth and making a film with a Greek choir telling the story of the Cretan monster. A Persian gold mask of an ox reigned among the exhibits. The spookiness of the labyrinth (adjusted to the children's height) was mildened by objects hidden inside it: an unguentarium in the shape of a hedgehog, an oil lamp with the depiction of a frog or a marble statue of Halinka Ostrowska with a kitten.

"An old doctor, traveller, madman. An Englishman. His surgery went wrong. They sacked him and he developed an inferiority complex. He became withdrawn. He started killing people. He went on the run, travelled the world and started collecting weird things,[20] and when many years later he returned to his room, he fell out of the window, leaving the room just like we are going to arrange it." The aim of the next exhibition was to prove that "art can be scary." Skulls, mummies, skeletons, graveyards and spectres with flashing eyes, like the one in Beksiński's painting which the children called "Rotting Zombie" – it turned out that the Polish National Museum was able to satisfy the English fancy for chambers of horror. *The Ghost Room* was the most literary part of the project and, similarly to contemporary narrative exhibitions, also used multimedia. Those who went too close to a painting were not scolded by the "guardian lady" – their careless steps were followed by the warning sound of raven wings. From the receiver of an old Bakelite telephone one could hear very frightening sounds (recorded by the curators, who gave it their all).

"Courage is the focal point of our exhibition" – *Playing the Hero. Playing*, because a multimedia crossword was an additional attraction of the exhibition. The free choice of exhibits went with the free choice of heroes. The list of worthy heroes included Józef Piłsudski, Albert Einstein, a Japanese samurai, Emilia Plater, a museum guard and Father Christmas (because he wanted to share). The children also found their peer – Napoleon as a schoolboy, commanding

[19] All quotations from childrens' statements come from *The "Anything Goes" Museum* exhibition catalogue, op. cit.

[20] "This is the first book in the history of the Museum, where orthography has been liberated!" – as write the authors of a text included in the exhibition catalogue, op. cit., p. 246. In Polish text, the word "things" is misspelled: it reads "żeczy" instead of "rzeczy."

a snowball fight. This part of the exhibition should be recommended to sociologists lamenting the downfall of authorities. Children not only do not have to know anything about styles. They do not have to share our criteria of heroism either.

Despite the revisions of the old idea of museum as a "treasure trove," one of the curator groups did see the museum precisely that way. As it is well known, there are no hidden treasures without a story about extraordinary discoveries. The children invented a story about a Malaysian tourist, who was looking for a job in Poland and became a street sweeper. While he was sweeping the pavement in front of the National Museum, he found a secret hole, leading to the vault. But as soon as the Malaysian street sweeper left the vault, he got struck by lightning and it was only the blue curator group that found the treasures and decided to show them to the public. There was a lot of gold: Egyptian rings, Mycenaean masks, diamond brooches, and also statuettes of unknown deities, Asian dragons, a dolls' tea service, stereoscopic photographs of art marvels and, of course, sturdy padlocks that protected the treasure.

It was decided that shoes, sabres, dresses, skirts, tailcoats, kimonos and costumes also deserved an exhibition. Speaking in their name, the curators impersonated a Chinese shoe, an old sabre or a portrait of a film star. By enabling the museum exhibits to speak for themselves, they gave them life. Objects became subjects. This was the true title "change" of the last exhibition.

What changes did the whole "*Anything Goes*" *Museum* bring? First of all, it required letting go of habits – from the museum institution and from the spectators alike. The institution had to open up to the "barbarians in the garden" and the spectators had to go further than to just condescend to the little ones who make spelling mistakes. Whether this exhibition will remain but a one-time experiment, or whether both parties will be able to draw far-reaching conclusions – not only for the sake of the children's psyche, which was under close scrutiny here – will depend on the readiness for change.[21] For those professionally associated with art, an exhibition curated by children may become an inspiration for deep reflection and a chance to change their approach to art and art history. This is not a question of realizing the age-old romantic dream of the "innocent eye." The eyes of modern children, constantly bombarded with aggressive multimedia iconosphere, are by no means "innocent." Unaccustomed to concentration, they might even be more sinful that ever. However, if they indeed are tarnished, it is not by the *déformation professionelle* of experts, nor by education that instructs "how to look at a work of art."

The exhibition was a serious challenge – like "checking!" shouted not only at the museum system. The further we go, the more doubts arise. If there are so many animals in the museum, then why do the titles usually refer to people and their history? Why was it necessary to rummage through the whole collection in order to find heroes? Why are there so many marvels hidden from sight? Why are there no warnings that there is a lot of horror, cruelty and death in art? Why are we obliged to justify why we like something or not? Questions inspired by the exhibition sound like an echo of modern humanities – provided that one has the courage to question the irrefutable humanistic axioms.

With his *Atlas Mnemosyne*, Aby Warburg is a modern patron of self-doubting humanities.[22] According to the Polish translator Paweł Brożyński: "The *Atlas* has moved away from its original

[21] The seminar (see n. 11) was largely devoted to those questions (speeches of Maria Wasińska-Stelmaszczyk, Ewa Modzelewska-Kossowska, Magdalena Szostkowska).

[22] A superb essay on Warburg's significance in art history: Paweł Brożyński, "Wstęp do wydania polskiego," in Aby Warburg, *Atlas obrazów Mnemozyne*, ed. Maria Warnek with the cooperation of Claudia Brink, academic

form and milieu and become an exhibition *modus* and fodder for curators."[23] The last and most renowned plate no. 79 served as a ceremonial opening of the *Carambolages*,[24] a motto and tribute in one. Does it make sense to mention the plates of the *Atlas* in the context of *The "Anything Goes" Museum*? Warburg himself called them "a ghost story for complete adults."[25] However, if we go around the "thicket of overproduced interpretations" and look at the plates of the *Atlas* with their original titles, it seems that many of them could also be a "ghost story" for non-adults. The idea of *The "Anything Goes" Museum* was to give the children complete freedom of choice, motifs and creating connections. There were no tasks given. However, the storeroom queries of the junior-curators, despite the fun and joy of discovering extraordinary objects, were by no means aimless "passages." This was not about carefree compilations and juxtapositions of images – on the contrary, the goal was to create meaningful ensembles by discovering hidden links between seemingly distant ideas. And this is exactly what the *Mnemosyne* plates are. It has been rightly remarked that Warburg was too rashly called the patron of the "montage" discourse and decontextualization of ideas.[26] Most of the plates (which were supposed to be accompanied by commentary, after all) look just like visual materials for lectures on very specific subjects, created before the invention of slides. This is why one cannot help but think how children would approach Warburgian motifs, such as "Victor's pathos," "Ascent towards the sun," "Magical anatomy. Looking inside the viscera," "The Underworld," "Protecting a child in danger." A meeting of a great mad scientist with children – and why not?

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

supervision of the Polish edition and translation from German: Paweł Brożyński and Małgorzata Jędrzejczak (Warsaw, 2015), pp. VII–XXI. The text includes a critical opinion of the belated reception of Warburg's thought in Poland, "following the global trends," and of the "mythologies of the *Atlas*," pp. XII, XIII et al.

[23] Ibid., p. XII.

[24] Pierre Bayard, "Pour une exposition mobile," in *Carambolages*, op. cit., p. 35.

[25] As cited in Brożyński, op. cit., p. VII.

[26] Ibid., p. XIII.