

BOOK REVIEW: Nora Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*

Friederike Landau



This collection, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* [The Radical Democratic Museum], by art theorist and curator Nora Sternfeld assembles twelve essays, published between 2012 and 2018, about the radical reconceptualisation of museums as contested public spaces. Placing the negotiation of conflicting positions centre-stage, Sternfeld suggests museums as places for democratic debate and the development of new modes of political (re)presentation, organisation and action. The conceptually ambitious objective of the book is to unhinge the dominant conception of the museum as a Western and bourgeois institution to make the concept of museums fertile for anti-racist, decolonial and queer/feminist struggles as part of a radical democratic cultural fabric. Against announcements that museums are ‘ending’¹ or ‘weary’ institutions,² Sternfeld advocates that museums as emancipatory spaces of self-reflexive critique and transformation can crucially contribute to reshuffling the complicated entanglements of meanings of pasts, presents and futures.

From the established definition of a museum, as promoted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), describing a museum’s function as revolving around areas of collecting, displaying, organising, researching and mediating, Sternfeld suggests repositioning these definitional vectors with the help of the counter-hegemonic theoretical framework of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe³ and their consideration of institutions of power as results of

¹ See Catherine Grenier, *La Fin des Musées*, Editions du Regard, Paris, 2013

² See Daniel Tyradellis, *Müde Museen, Oder: Wie Ausstellungen unser Denken verändern können*, Edition Körber, Hamburg, 2014

³ See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London and New York, 1985

conflictual articulatory processes to be permanently re- and dis-articulated toward new formations of hegemony (or counter-hegemony). Sternfeld proposes to 1: challenge the archive, 2: appropriate space, 3: organise a counter-public, 4: produce alternative knowledge, and 5: radicalise mediation. In three thematically structured sections, Sternfeld first of all sketches the political and democratic theoretical contours of the crisis of representation in museums, moves on to discuss the transforming role of objects and artefacts in museums, and then, lastly, engages with conflict-laden practices of learning, unlearning and educating in museum contexts.

Most prominently, Sternfeld suggests the ‘para-museum’, a conflict-attuned spatial and discursive structure that operates both within and beyond the museum space, which ‘appropriates itself as museum, with its own means’ (p 64). Put differently, the para-museum evokes the museum as a haunted place with temporal, spatial and meaning-related asynchronies that do not negate but bring to the fore the complexly interwoven history of museum objects. In the para-museum, the place and presence of things and stories told (or not) are irritated, challenged. Deviation is considered productive, and part of curatorial and educational practices that are an ‘uncanny praxis which wants to bring to life the ghosts of sedimented conflicts and histories of violence’ (p 92). While the essays have been published individually in international publications over the past seven years, the connecting conceptual tissue of the publication lies in the appeal to unsettle existing, constricting definitions of what museums ‘are’ and ‘do’ (or not). The political project of the book is to intervene in dominant discourses of seemingly consensual museal practices and politics, and, instead of aligning with the diagnosis of postpolitics, to promote the necessity of struggle and counter-hegemonic ways of curating, mediating, displaying and archiving to ultimately repoliticise museums.

Starting off with identifying public institutions in a state of multiple crises of representation, legitimacy and economisation, museums, as one such public infrastructure, face a variety of challenges, such as the expansion of logics of commercialisation, neoliberalisation and spectacularisation into museum spaces. Drawing on the theorist Irit Rogoff,⁴ Sternfeld draws attention to the possibilities of the museum as ‘space of opportunity’ as opposed to ‘space of representation’ to highlight the potential of post-representational modes of ‘we’ or ‘solidarity’. *Post*-representational, in this context, does not mean *after* the struggle about representation, but decidedly pushes for a more radical approach to reflect on who can (or cannot) represent whom in power-laden spaces such as museums now.

Sternfeld identifies three founding myths for the origin of the Western-centric notion of museums: first, Greek antiquity; second, the chambers of wonder (‘Wunderkammer’) that

⁴ See Irit Rogoff, ‘Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture’, in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Gavin Butt, ed, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford and Carlton, pp 117–134, 2005 (available at https://kvelv.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/irit_rogoff_looking_away_participations_in_visual_culture.pdf)

emerged in the Enlightenment; and third, the French Revolution, which brought forth modern museums such as the Louvre. In essay 3, ‘De-Provincialising the Museum: What would a museum be if it weren’t a Western concept?’ (2016), she suggests the museum as ‘a space of assembly, in which people, via objects and stories, remember a different possible future and an understanding of the present in light of the past’ which serves as a platform to gather, learn and educate, but also as an arena or ‘contact zone’ for contestation (p 58). Beyond a merely deconstructive move to deprovincialise the museum, Sternfeld draws on the radical democratic, post-Marxist or post-foundationalist discourse analytical hegemony theory of Laclau and Mouffe in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* from 1985, which crucially engages with conflict, contingency and ontological lack or absence in order to understand the making and unmaking of hegemonic institutions. Mouffe, who has written extensively on the role of critical artistic practices as modes to invigorate radical democracy, as well as on the role of art institutions for radical democracy,⁵ helps Sternfeld to approach the notion of the museum not by what it ‘is’ but rather by what it ‘does’ or does not do. Hence, there is no grand claim for a new or better definition of what a museum ‘is’, but, rather, a shift in considering the museum as a place which emerges in the face of multiple conflicts that need to be balanced between diverse stakeholders. In the quest to understand museums by what they do, can do, or don’t do, Sternfeld (p 81) asks a probably unpopular question for museum workers, mediators, pedagogues and curators who promote a quasi-unchallenged appreciation for ‘participatory’ projects in the museum: What happens in the museum if nothing happens? What do we do with emptiness and stillness in the museum? What does refusal, absence, or rejection of participation say about the necessity or problems inherent in participation? What are the relations between participation and (re)presentation and ownership in the museum and beyond?

Drawing on scholars who have been critical of participation, such as Irit Rogoff and Claire Bishop,⁶ Sternfeld underlines the necessity of conflict for both cultural mediation and participation (p 78): ‘Participation does not follow an invitation: It is fought for, thwarted, and moves societal logics that have existed until this point.’ Hence, participatory projects or cultural mediation cannot operate as p/maternalistic gestures to activate, include or educate ‘difficult’ audiences or social groups, but, rather, need to be aware of their own assumptions, prejudices and lack of knowledge. In short, ‘the discourse of mediation does not believe to know either the art nor the public fully’ (p 150). In this vein, Sternfeld proposes (un)learning as a practice to (re)appropriate contested spaces, meanings and positionalities.

⁵ See Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, Verso, London and New York, 2013; ‘An agonistic conception of the museum’, in *Museu: Un proyecto de Es Baluard*, 2016 (http://proyectomuseu.org/an-agonistic-conception-of-the-museum/?doing_wp_cron=1557934539.7571690082550048828125); and ‘Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces’, in *ART&RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol 1, no 2, 2007 (available at <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>)

⁶ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London and New York, 2012

The second section transposes the radical democratic conceptual vectors of contingency and conflict to museum objects. In essay 4, 'Not fully fitting: The unspectacular resistance of material' (2014), Sternfeld raises questions of what belongs in or to the museum and brings up the idea of museum objects as haunted or ghostly matter. Citing Aleida Assmann,⁷ Sternfeld valorises the unshown aspects of collections as 'unused opportunities, alternatives, contradictions', drawing attention to the hidden, forgotten, suppressed, covered stories and conflicts that continue to 'live' in objects. Essay 5, 'The Object Effect' (2016), most poignantly deals with the ambivalent entanglements between objects, human subjects (eg curators) and the haunted dynamics of valorisation in the museum. Sternfeld departs from Walter Benjamin's 'aura' of things, and Marx's theory of use and exchange value, the latter which might – in the case of useless/purposeless/autonomous art – problematically simplify use value as 'good' and exchange value as 'bad' (p 118). Building on this potentially binary impasse, Sternfeld brings in the Derridean framework of the haunted, hauntological or spectral, which has already made fleeting appearances in essays 3 and 4, to discuss museum objects as part of ghostly processes of valorisation (which, unfortunately, do not stop at artefacts and museum objects).⁸ On the one hand, if valorisation transforms 'things' into commodities beyond their use value, the expansion of market logic into the museum would leave the latter as potentially radical democratic institutions in a fairly shady light. On the other hand, the hauntological 'awakening' of objects – be it via (de)valorisation, historicisation, (de)colonisation or (re)politicisation – foregrounds objects' agency as bearers of economic, cultural and political value. Attending to this agency, and the contested meanings and stories inscribed in museum objects (ie carrying colonial and/or violent and/or exploitative pasts, and possibly presents) could ultimately contribute to problematising museums as places of 'ossified conflicts' (p 122), and remobilise these seemingly buried conflicts. Precisely when we attend to the traces of conflicts things carry inside, the objectification of things as contested commodities can unleash unexpected meanings, values and powers the 'thing' did not have. While Sternfeld's references to actor-network theory, let alone assemblage theory, remain rather gestural, these approaches could provide an interesting analytical route for future research into museums as governmental assemblages of different agencies and power struggles.⁹

Opening the third section on critical mediation strategies, essay 6, 'Wrestled Memories: Memorial sites as Contact Zones' (2016), engages with the importance of the localisation of memory, but also addresses the problematic that too much spatialisation of museums

⁷ Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, C H Beck, Munich 2009, p 140

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994

⁹ See Tony Bennett, 'Thinking (with) Museums: From Exhibitionary Complex to Governmental Assemblage', in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies, Volume 1: Museum Theory*, Kylie Message and Andrea Witcomb, eds, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, 2015

(infamously known as museumisation) might overwhelm, and thus depoliticise, a collective memory (p 128). Aligning with the hauntological framework again, which foregrounds the persistent inconclusiveness of matter and meaning, Sternfeld pleads to give ‘space to these fissures and do justice to them’ (p 139). In the agonistic contact zones of memorial sites, which negotiate memory as a result of conflictual processes of inclusions, exclusions and broken links, the importance of this section is to establish both memory and history as contested, but differentiate memory as differently contested than history because facts about what happened (ie history) might mean different things to different communities, while the access to what happened (ie memory) might be overturned depending on contemporary makings of (collective) memory. Generally here, Sternfeld advocates for an understanding of memorial sites as shared spaces to acknowledge and give room to conflict. This conflict-oriented understanding of such sites would neither dilute contradictions nor privilege any one conflict as all-absorbing (p 142).

Essay 7, ‘Where does mediation stand? An introduction which encounters its own scepticism’ (2017), discusses cultural mediation in the context of an expansionist logic of neoliberalisation, which concerns both the pressure on public institutions and the growing precarity of individual museum workers. Sternfeld critically describes the relation between politics and pedagogy as a ‘pedagogisation of politics’ and reveals the latter as a neoliberal strategy of normalising precarity, instability and individual responsibility (p 153). In the worst case, this pedagogisation would be complicit in cementing postpolitical politics under the pretext of open, participatory or critical discourse (p 240). To counter this abuse of critical pedagogy as a pacifier for neoliberal postpolitics, Sternfeld argues for the necessary ‘repoliticisation of pedagogy’, stating that ‘if politics always needs a pedagogy to maintain itself, politics can always also be questioned and delegitimised by pedagogy’ (p 154).

Essay 9, ‘“Give her the tools, she will know what to do with them!” How we can learn something that does not exist yet’ (2018) lays a first track for discussing the possibly emancipatory power of museums. Borrowing the title from the feminist punk band Charismatic Megafauna and contrasting it with Audre Lorde’s rather sombre slogan ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’,¹⁰ Sternfeld discusses both the opportunities as well as the limitations of institutional critique and transformation via critical pedagogical and mediation work. Asking the most pressing question with regards to the necessity (or not) of transforming power-laden spaces such as museums – ‘Does the house of the master actually (still) belong to the master?’¹¹ – Sternfeld argues, similar to Mouffe, that a pure exodus from problematic institutions will not solve their problems. Rather, critical

¹⁰ Audre Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Crossing Press, Berkeley, California, 1984, p 110

¹¹ Ibid

museum workers should ‘hibernate in another possible future’ (p 177), to work towards the institution and knowledge that is ‘not-there-yet’.

The evocative survival of the ‘not-there-yet’ strategy is further explicated in essay 10, ‘Showing each other something that is not there yet: Thoughts on representational practices of *Büro trafo.K*’ (2017), which outlines the productivity of acting on and trying to speak and represent the ‘not-there-yet’ in image production and cultural education initiatives. The cultural mediation work of the Vienna-based office ‘trafo.K’ (which Sternfeld founded and has been a part of since 1999, collaborating with arts and cultural educators Renate Höllwart, Elke Smodics and psychologist Ines Garnitschnig) aims to create ‘other images’ that go beyond the normalised heteronormative gaze of depicting identities, normalcies and socio-political assumptions about society, gender, class and race. Drawing on Peggy Phelan’s work about the politics of the (un)marked,¹² Sternfeld complicates the generally uncontroversial call that *more* visibility, *more* (re)presentation and *more* presence, or *more* inclusion might be better. In contrast, these (additive) logics would erase the voices and positions of ‘power of unmarked, unspoken, and unseen’. Hence, as Sternfeld concludes, ‘[i]t is not primarily about visibility. It is much more about existing politically, and in that sense, it is about power to define’ (p 191). To stratify this ‘power to define’, approaches to cultural mediation shall be geared towards creating an awareness of how socio-political meaning is created when making (or unmaking) images that extend what is sayable and visible, to say it with Rancière (p 220).¹³ Especially in this part of the book, the notion of the ‘not-there-yet’, or an engagement with the radical democratic concepts of absence, lack and negativity would maybe have made an even more convincing argument to understand the necessity for dissident images.

Essay 11, ‘Corresponding, promising, talking back: What do we have to say to each other in learning’ (2018), deals less directly with museums or their socio-political transformations towards radical democracy but provides insight into Sternfeld’s practical work as a queer-feminist educator as part of *Büro trafo.K*. She shares honest stories about facing one’s own complex and entangled prejudices about ability, sexual orientation and gender identity, and having to learn and then unlearn them. Unlearning, in this context, is understood as ‘not forgetting, it is not deletion, cancellation nor burning off. It is writing bolder and writing anew. It is commenting and questioning. It is giving new footnotes to old and other narratives’ (Sternfeld is here citing a member of the Berlin-based postcolonial art space SAVVY Contemporary, p 93).

The final essay, essay 12, ‘Why exhibit at all? An answer from the year 2030’ (2017),¹⁴ responds to the first claim of challenging the archive, by defining the latter as ‘a space of control, a space of order, a space of normalisation, but simultaneously also a space to create

¹² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 1993, p 7

¹³ See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum International Publishing, 2010

¹⁴ For an English version, see http://www.betonsalon.net/IMG/pdf/qalqalah-3_1_4.pdf

access to knowledge for others ... an archive is an instrument whose use is not immanent to it, but is being inscribed into it by its archivists and users' (p 250).

In conclusion, even though I may have sometimes wished that the essays would have been more contextualised or annotated in relation to their contribution to the five counter-hegemonic definitional vectors of the ICOM definition, this potential critique also reveals the biggest contribution of the book: showing the need and rising urgency to engage with museums in a politically radical framework that assembles analytical and activist rigour in order to understand museums as agonistic public spaces. Sternfeld's reversal of the ICOM definition of what a museum 'is' presents the book as a counter-hegemonic institution par excellence: appropriating existing terms and institutions and questioning their seemingly natural or monolithic meanings. As part of this project, Sternfeld shows the openings towards emancipation that arise when we dare to break open terms such as memory, heritage, museum object, participation or cultural mediation, pointing at their ultimate commonality: their conflictuality and inconclusiveness, and the concomitant need to (re)politicise both concepts and practices.

Maybe the next project by Sternfeld, or other activist-academics who are interested in radical museums, could be entitled 'Radical Democratic Museums', in the plural, and could provide a kaleidoscope of empirical international case studies that show where and how radical museums are materialising, being curated, funded, built, mediated, etc, and by whom. In this context, another additional area of research could be a more thorough engagement with the spatiality of radical democratic museums, which is not quite the same as the materiality, materialisation or dematerialisation of museums and museum objects – which Sternfeld does talk about in the second section. I wonder if radical democratic museums in future settings will be more mobile, more digital, smaller, larger, or even placeless? I look forward to hearing, reading, seeing and experiencing more of this project to (re)politicise an understanding that museums, after all, belong to 'us' all.

Nora Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* is published by De Gruyter, Edition Angewandte, 2018, ISBN 978-3-11-061084-0

Friederike Landau is a postdoctoral research fellow at Bauhaus University, Weimar, and associate fellow at the Center for Metropolitan Studies, Berlin. She is the author of *Agonistic Articulations in the 'Creative' City: On New Actors and Activism in Berlin's Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2019)