

Temporary Museum Exhibitions as Tools for Cultural Innovation



Kali Tzortzi and Katerina Koukouvaou

Abstract In the current communication era where priority is given to the temporary over the permanent, museums are increasingly developing temporary exhibitions and through them the museum is being transformed. These are used as strategic devices offering diverse opportunities: from acting as powerful marketing tools, triggering visits, and generating income, to experimenting with new display approaches and creating prestige for the museum. At the same time, they raise challenges, including in keeping balance with other key museum functions. Against the background of a critical overview of their significance in museum literature, and of a set of themes characterizing the phenomenon in Greek archaeological museums over the last decade, the paper focuses on a temporary exhibition realized through a partnership between a public national museum and a private cultural foundation. Its analysis, based mainly on interviews with curators and organizers, will suggest that this unique initiative between two Greek partners has a much broader relevance. Examining it in the context of national exhibition policies, European initiatives and guidelines and international experience, allows it to be argued, in the last part of the paper, that the joining in partnership of private and public bodies in the context of temporary museum exhibitions can emerge as a tool for cultural innovation and contribute to new and imaginative ways of using museum collections. At the same time, it can extend business support for museums well beyond the traditional forms of funding and sponsorship.

Keywords Temporary museum exhibitions · Cultural innovation · Public-private partnership

K. Tzortzi (✉)
University of Patras, Patras, Greece
e-mail: ktzortzi@upatras.gr

K. Koukouvaou
Ministry of Culture and Sports, Athens, Greece

1 Introduction

In the current communication era where priority is given to the temporary over the permanent, museums are increasingly developing temporary exhibitions and through them the museum is being transformed. Museums are ‘living cultural institutions’ and their temporary exhibitions are strategic devices that offer diverse opportunities: from acting as powerful marketing tools, triggering visits, and generating income, on the one hand, to experimenting with new display approaches and creating prestige for the museum, on the other. At the same time, they raise challenges, including in keeping balance with other key museum functions. Against the background of a critical overview of the significance of temporary exhibitions in museum literature, and in the framework of a set of themes that characterize the phenomenon of temporary exhibitions in Greek archaeological museums in the last decade, the paper focuses on a current temporary exhibition, ‘The countless aspects of Beauty’ (2018), which is of particular interest for two key reasons. First, it is the product of a partnership between a public national museum, the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, and a private cultural foundation, the Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation, and as such an exceptional case where an external party is involved in a public museum’s exhibition policy. Second, as its analysis, based on press releases, media commentaries and, most importantly, interviews with the people involved in its conception and realization, suggests, it has a much broader value. Examining it in the context of national exhibition policies, European initiatives and guidelines and international experience, allows it to be argued, in the last part of the paper, that the joining in partnership of private and public bodies in the context of temporary exhibitions can emerge as a tool for cultural innovation and contribute to new and imaginative ways of using museum collections.

2 Temporary Exhibitions in the Museum Literature

The concept ‘temporary exhibition’ tends to take its meaning, as a short-term exhibition, in relation to the opposite concept of ‘permanent collections’, the core collections of the museum. However, the differences between the two are not always clear [1]. Some museum curators even dislike the contrasting of permanent and temporary projects [2], and there seems to be no generally accepted definition, given the complexity of the phenomenon. According to Belcher [3], they are meant to last for years, while for Herreman [4] they ‘offer visitors the chance to see something new within a specific time span’. As museum practice suggests, ‘most temporary exhibitions run for less than a year, while permanent exhibitions are expected to last for five, ten or more years’ [4]. Recently, the term pop-up exhibitions has been introduced to describe a new form of temporary exhibitions that ‘might last only a few days or a couple of weeks’ [5]. Historically temporary exhibitions have always been particularly important to art museums as a primary generator of audiences,

publicity and finance [6], as well as opportunities to address new themes and carry out extensive research in a specific area [2]. Closely related to this concept is that of the ‘traveling exhibition’ which, though it shares common features with the ‘temporary exhibition’, its fundamental distinctive characteristic is its presentation in a series of museums, within the same country or abroad, which means being visited by a more diverse audience [4].

More importantly, from the point of view of this paper, it is notable that, though the practice of temporary exhibitions has been significantly growing over the last decades, there has not been in parallel an equivalent discussion in the literature. There are numerous publications about particular cases, but few deal with temporary exhibitions as a particular exhibition type [5] or as a theoretical phenomenon, either in the context of a single institution (as for example about the National Gallery London in Hersov’s PhD, 2017 [7]) or in the broader context of the contemporary museum landscape (as in the case of the panel discussion of seven experts organized by the UK Museums Association about the future of temporary exhibitions and published in the form of a series of articles in ‘Museums Journal’ in 2009). In the past, particular emphasis was given to practical issues of design in temporary exhibitions [8, 9]. Recently, authors like Tobelem [10] and Jacobi [11] emphasize the marketing dimension of temporary exhibitions in terms of creating income and improving a museum’s public image. But more recently, others like Bradburne [12] and Schneider [13] take a more critical view, arguing that temporary exhibitions that become ‘blockbuster shows’ might increase visitor numbers but, in the long run, put at risk museum viability by de-emphasizing permanent collections. It is said that ‘in certain cases the collection has receded spatially and programmatically, while the temporary exhibition takes the limelight’ [6]. It is explicitly outlined in the recent literature that there is a need for new temporary exhibition models [14]. Kelly [15], for example, argues that collaboration is ‘the way forward for museums looking to develop temporary exhibitions’, and Tinley [14] more explicitly points out that ‘the ability to network into others that are not just the usual group of people is very important’, such as for example the current trend for museum-academic collaborations in UK. In general, it is hoped that ‘people will start to think of a slightly different model of exhibition and re-embrace the virtues of a smaller exhibition that [...] offers viewers a more detailed experience of fewer works of art’, as well as of exhibitions that draw on permanent collections [16]. In response to this need, emphasis has lately been given to the co-production of temporary exhibitions as an operational model that brings together museum experts and external parties not just during the process of production but also in decision-making and other management aspects [17].

Comparatively less attention is given to the challenges of temporary exhibitions in the Greek museum literature. Within this, among the milestones in the theoretical and practical development of the phenomenon, we can distinguish three publications: the study of the evolution and integration of temporary and traveling exhibitions in the Greek archaeological museums, from the 1970s to mid-1990s, by Mouliou [18] as part of her doctoral thesis; the publication of the second (2008) issue of ‘Illisia’, the journal of the Byzantine and Christian Museum, dedicated to the

‘Mobility of Museum Collections’, which drew attention to institutional and practical issues deriving from the collaboration between European museums in the context of temporary exhibitions; and the recent (October 2017) international 2-day conference on ‘Archaeological Temporary Exhibitions: their role, best practices, and their unseen aspects’, where the organization of temporary exhibitions was for the first time dealt with as a complex phenomenon, with institutional, cultural and scientific dimensions.

3 A New Form of Collaboration Through Temporary Exhibitions

Shifting attention from theory to practice, in Greek archaeological museums in particular, the organization of temporary exhibitions constitutes a contemporary, interdisciplinary and widespread museum practice. Since the 1990s, the phenomenon has been integrated in public and non-public museums both in urban and peripheral areas. Their advantages are said [19] to include exhibition design experimentation, the upgrading of the public image of the museum, increase in attendance figures and opening of the museum to a wider audience, creation of additional income, knowledge exchange and promotion of research. In parallel, it is argued [18, 20], temporary exhibitions work as communication tools through which national policy and public diplomacy are conducted, since they can constitute ideological statements transmitting discursive and non-discursive meanings.

Looking comparatively at temporary exhibitions organized by Greek archaeological museums in the last decade, they appear to share a series of key themes: (1) the ephemeral character, with the average duration of an exhibition being between 3 and 6 months (exceptions include both exhibitions lasting less than 3 months as well as more than a year); (2) the relation of meanings to those of the permanent collection which forms the point of reference of each museum; (3) museum renewal, which can result either from the application of new interpretative techniques, or the recontextualization of the collections through loans that enrich exhibition material; (4) the development of an extrovert character, both through collaborations with similar institutions and through the approach of new audiences; (5) the promotion of scientific knowledge through the publication of exhibition catalogues and the organization of complementary events, ranging from those of a more scientific character, such as conferences, to ones addressed to a wider public, as mainly educational activities; (6) the generation of additional income resources, often through retail; and (7) the improvement of the public image of the museum and of Greece.

These themes might be thought of as representing the conventional wisdom and can be contrasted to the constant evolution of the phenomenon globally [10]. The current exhibition ‘The countless aspects of Beauty’, however, while sharing most of the main themes identified above, appears to add new and distinctive features that

point to potential future developments. One distinctive feature is that intriguingly it combines the form of a temporary and a traveling exhibition. It takes the form of a temporary exhibition for the organizer, the National Archaeological Museum (NAM), and, at the same time, belongs to the traveling exhibition model through its smaller version that is the product of a 2-year collaboration (2018–2019) between the major public Greek museum and the voluntary non-profit cultural foundation of the Piraeus Bank Group (PIOP), a collaboration initiated by the Director of the latter, Alexandra Rapti. The exhibition is shown, in 2018, in three thematic museums of the borrower, which have been selected from among those of the PIOP Museum Network on the basis of the needs and expectations of the communities they serve, with the aim of being more relevant to them and responsive to their interests [21]. In Sparta, the exhibition is related to the current project of the new archaeological museum of the city; in Ioannina, the local community has been shown to embrace this kind of exhibition, while in Tinos, the exhibition is integrated into the celebrations for the 10 years since the opening of the museum.

In terms of content, the temporary exhibition (inaugurated in NAM in May 2018) presents 340 works from the collections of the NAM, organized thematically, as conceptualized by its Director Dr. Maria Lagogianni [22]. The traveling exhibition (inaugurated in April 2018, so a month earlier than the temporary) shows 40 works from the Prehistoric and Vase and Metallurgy Collections of the NAM [22], some displayed for the first time, lent to PIOP for a period of 9 months in 2018. Though the traveling exhibition follows the same concept and themes with the temporary, as well as the same exhibition design style, it allows for different stories to be told, in the sense of ‘situated’ narratives. In each of the three museums, a different theme is enhanced through exhibition design devices (positioning, graphic design), making clear the relevance to its permanent collections: the use of oils for the care of the body, in the Museum of Olive and Greek Olive Oil in Sparta; its beautification through jewelry and accessories for cloths, in the Silversmith Museum in Ioannina; and the creation of the Cycladic marble figurines, in the Museum of Marble Crafts in Tinos. Thus, permanent displays and loaned objects are juxtaposed conceptually as well as physically, more clearly in the case of the Silversmith Museum, and ancient art and modern cultural heritage are brought together. The result is a bespoke exhibition which is relevant to the local audiences of the three museums.

Over and above the loan of works (from the side of the organizer) and the taking up of organization costs (from the side of the borrower), the sharing of resources included the offering by NAM of exhibition accessories (such as display cases) and most importantly human resources, that is the expertise of its team of experienced conservators [21, 22].

The local audiences’ very positive response is reflected in the considerable increase in visitor numbers, with the exhibition being visited: in Sparta by 6500 visitors, in a period of 2 months, and so making it the most successful temporary exhibition in this museum; in Ioannina, by 15,000 visitors, and so attracting in a period of less than 2 months the average annual number of visitors [23]; and in Tinos by 18,000 visitors in a period of 2 months (so with each month being about four

times higher than the monthly average), leading to an 1-month extension of its duration [21]. The exhibition will be shown in two more museums of PIOP in 2019.

4 Interpretation and Discussion

Though this collaboration is very recent, and ‘The countless aspects of Beauty’ (in both its temporary and traveling exhibition formats) is still on show at the time of writing, it seems that, at a fundamental level, the exhibition itself addresses in novel ways both theoretical and practical issues raised by ephemeral display practices.

In terms of the theoretical context and at the local scale, the traveling exhibition content does not simply amplify the permanent collection of each museum but, through its relevance, helps visitors to better understand them, and see the links between past and present. This can enrich people’s lives, strengthen a place-based sense of belonging, and make them feel better about where they live. At the global level, the public national museum adjusted its collections to various local visitor needs through a private partner that acted as a mediator in decision-making between state authorities and local communities. This contributes to creating a fundamental new relation between the centre and the periphery, and between the national archaeological collections and the distinctive technological activity developed in each place, shaping its local image and identity. For both sides, and in terms of the inherent social role of museums, the working in partnership enables public and private partners to reach a much wider audience and be proud for having increased access to national collections and the stories these can tell, by making them available to more people and in more places.

In terms of practical issues, the collaboration opened up a new and imaginative way for museums to exploit the loan of objects. The partnership gives marketing visibility not only to the borrowing institution, but also to the lending museum, which can turn the absence of objects to a marketing device. For NAM, it is a creative and active way for deploying its rich collections, as well as an innovative gesture in its communication policy. By presenting them outside Athens, in ‘satellite’ exhibitions, it significantly develops the museum’s distribution channels [24]. Even more interestingly, it innovates by showing its archaeological collections in non-archaeological museums.

Not least, the act of collaborating is in itself a significant contribution to the ‘self-consciousness’ of each institution [21]. Building up trust with shared knowledge and ways of working can have far-reaching benefits for both partners. It could then be argued that this scheme of collaboration can be seen as a response to the need for a new model of exhibitions identified by the international museum literature (focus on smaller exhibitions, drawing on permanent collections, working with new partners) and as a way ahead in a period of changing political, social, and economic contexts. It is widely acknowledged [25] that ‘new and imaginative ways of using collections can make a major contribution to sustainability’, one of the key concerns of museums today. At a national level, this form of collaboration is well integrated

within the efforts of Greek museums to develop networks with other institutions. In particular, it can act in complementary ways with the exhibition policy of the Acropolis Museum that, since 2015, has been organizing a series of temporary exhibitions showing archaeological sites in collaboration with regional Greek museums, so as to raise interest to these places. At a European level, this sharing of collections is consistent with the focus on ‘Collection Mobility’, which emerged as a priority in 2004 and since 2008 has become a systematic pursuit. Mobility initiatives, such as the ‘Lending for Europe 21st Century Collections Mobility’ (2009) and the more recent ‘Connecting Early Medieval European Collections’ (2016) scheme intend to facilitate antiquities mobility between cultural heritage institutions within the EU, in order to generate operational museum strategies that are both public-centered and workable.

The discussion about museum models of public-private partnerships is in fact rapidly developing internationally [26–28]. Taken together, the above developments suggest that the joining in partnership of private and public bodies in the context of temporary museum exhibitions can work in favour of culture, and become a tool for cultural innovation, while at the same time extending business support for museums well beyond the traditional forms of funding and sponsorship. Incorporating joint ventures in exhibition and marketing strategy could be particularly beneficial for smaller, regional public museums, which have unique collections but lack the human resources, infrastructure and budget to promote them. It is of particular interest that the intervention of the private body is not in our case seen in terms of economic numbers (not least in the sense that there is no special admission charge beyond the low museum entrance fee), as might be expected from a private institution. Instead, it targets socially desirable aims in the cultural sector through an ‘accountability grounded more in societal interests and aspirations’ [29]—a contribution to the conservation of resources through sharing, localization and engagement of local communities, enticing of new audiences, and diversification of what is on show. In this sense, it could be suggested, this innovative way of using collections and sharing resources through temporary exhibitions incites a reflection on the new possibilities and new challenges for museums: their transformative potential towards the concept of the post-museum as defined by Hooper-Greenhill, that is, the museum that is directly linked to the concerns and ambitions of communities [29], and their critical task to make the museum work as ‘a civic space that is full of experiences that one can have in public or private terms’ [30].

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