

ACTIVISM IN MUSEUMS AND THE ETHICAL TURN OF ICOM*

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Abstract: This study explores the challenges and inherent contradictions within the new definition of the museum proposed by ICOM (International Council of Museums) in 2022, in light of the actions undertaken by climate activists within museum institutions. Following ICOM's declaration of an "ethical turning point," movements such as Just Stop Oil and Last Generation initiated a series of protests that, while promoting an ecological message, raised important questions about the neutrality and impartiality of museums. These events have highlighted the tensions embedded in ICOM's definition of the museum, which, despite its emphasis on inclusivity and universal ethics, clashes with the realities of museums operating within different national and cultural contexts. The article analyzes ICOM's and museum institutions' responses, with a particular focus on Italy, to demonstrate how reactions to activists vary across countries, undermining the effectiveness of ICOM's proposed universal museum model. Furthermore, the study examines how the concept of "neutrality" is problematic in the museum context, where curatorial choices and the display of artworks are inevitably influenced by political and social dynamics. Through critical and comparative analysis, the paper suggests that ICOM's definition of the museum is insufficient and ambiguous, failing to adequately address the challenges raised by activist movements, and reveals the contradictions of a model that claims universality yet fails to integrate local realities and the complex ethical issues tied to its implementation.

Keywords: Museum – ICOM Museum definition – Ethical turn – Climate
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Barely a year after what is referred to as the ethical turning point of the ICOM – International Council of Museums, a series of initiatives orchestrated by climate activists began to emerge within museums, and in many cases, in opposition to the artworks they house. These actions have highlighted, both indirectly and immediately, several issues related to the new definition of a museum articulated and proposed by ICOM in 2022 (ICOM, 2022).

The objective of this article is to explore the difficulties and inherent contradictions associated with this new definition of the museum through a comparative analysis of the content of this description and the responses of museums (primarily ICOM members) to the actions of activists. I contend that transnational movements such as Just Stop Oil and Last Generation, in addition to conveying their ecological message, have clearly raised questions directly related to museology: on one hand, the challenges—if not the impossibility—for museums to maintain a neutral and impartial stance, and on the other, the issues pertaining to the integration of museums within a universalist model.

Following the suggestion presented in Anne and Juliette Bessette’s article “On Environmental Activism in Museums,” published in *E-Flux* in December 2022: “It will be interesting to see how the judicial systems of various countries react when compelled, in the case of legal proceedings, to take a position on the legitimacy of these actions” (Bessette, A. & Bessette, J., 2022). Indeed, various reactions have emerged, illuminating contradictions and ambiguities regarding the role of the museum within society, primarily due to the ambiguity surrounding the meaning that ICOM attributes to the term “ethical.” In the first paragraph of my study, I will briefly examine the essential elements that characterized the actions of activists—demonstrative gestures oscillating between political action and performance: carefully orchestrated and predominant improvisations that have been reiterated in museums around the world.

In the second and third paragraphs, I will delve into the specifics of the new definition of the museum published in 2022. Drawing on ICOM’s response to climate activists, I will seek to highlight the challenges of developing an impartial ethical approach in the face of the utilitarian, homogenizing, and maximization tensions expressed by ICOM. Furthermore, I will discuss the issues surrounding the use of the term “ethical,” given that its application is not clearly defined.

In the fourth paragraph, I will analyze the reactions of museums and institutions in Italy toward activists. This country has been chosen as a case study due to the significant repression faced by the militants. Through a comparison of the markedly divergent reactions observed in Italy and Germany, I aim to address the challenges related to the actual effectiveness of the universal museum model proposed by ICOM in 2002 (ICOM, 2004) which has already been critiqued by numerous scholars in recent years (Burlingham, 2014; Vergès, F. 2023). I will attempt to demonstrate how this model is weakened not only by varied responses but also by differing—sometimes opposing—interpretations of the new definition of the museum in the countries concerned.

Although this study is situated within the field of museology—aiming to examine questions primarily related to the current definition of the museum and its role in society—it develops, from a methodological perspective, from assumptions and aspects related to museography. Jérôme Glicenstein, in his work *L’Art: une histoire d’expositions*, emphasizes that in matters of museography, neutrality does not exist, as works of art never present themselves in isolation; rather, “although every art lover would deny it, one never speaks of a work as such, but rather of the conditions surrounding one’s encounter with it” (Glicenstein, 2009,

p. 10). The work is exhibited in a manner determined by specific choices: “extremely significant choices, which are not necessarily made by the artist, yet which nonetheless shape the subsequent reception of the work. Furthermore, we rarely discover works of art in the absence of any mediation” (Glicenstein, 2009, p. 11). Glicenstein further clarifies that “the exhibition is among the most ambivalent entities: it is both a material entity, as it represents a singular and contextual presentation of something, and an immaterial entity, as it involves a set of relationships between objects, between these objects, a place, and an audience, and even among the audience members themselves” (Glicenstein, 2009, p. 11).

Museums are quintessential exhibition spaces; therefore, if one replaces the term “exhibition” with “museum” in the previous citation, the equation remains unchanged. The issues at hand remain identical; it is important to note that, in comparison to a simple exhibition, the number of relationships or subjects and objects involved increases exponentially, as museums—whether public or private—are also sites of research, collection, and conservation, as indicated by ICOM’s 2022 definition (ICOM, 2022).

Furthermore, this study will be conducted in continuity with Foucauldian approaches that associate the functioning of the museum with that of a disciplinary device (Crimp, 1993) and that apply the “archaeological” method of “considering discourses as forms of practices” to be defined “in their specificity, within the complexity of their original contexts” (Glicenstein, 2009, p. 216). In this theoretical framework, analytical tools drawn from philosophical studies, contemporary art research, and museology will be employed. These elements will be enriched by sources such as interviews, journal articles, and statements from those directly involved.

By adopting this relativistic perspective, I will endeavor to understand the museum primarily from a socio-political angle, aiming to add a new case study to better comprehend the actual functioning and role of museums within neoliberal society. The hypothesis is that, with this approach, it will be possible to reveal the limitations and paradoxes of the new definition of the museum, but more importantly, the impossibility of understanding and applying it uniformly across different geographic regions. While there certainly exists a common definition promoted by ICOM, I contend that it is the absence of a shared purpose that emerges in the institutional responses provided to activists, which undermines the effectiveness of ICOM’s *modus operandi*.

Climate Activists

After numerous road blockades and paint attacks on the headquarters of oil companies, climate activists have begun to conduct a series of actions against artworks in museums, gaining incredible notoriety worldwide. The turning point can be pinpointed when British activist Phoebe Plummer, then twenty-one years old, threw tomato soup at the glass of Vincent Van Gogh’s painting *Sunflowers* and glued herself to the frame of the same painting alongside Anna Holland, uttered the famous words: “What’s worth more, art or life?” (Il Post, 2022)

Anne and Juliette Bessette, in their article for E-Flux, reflecting on the communicative awareness of activists, argue that: “Until now, when works of art had been attacked in museums, the visual traces of these acts of vandalism – when they existed – were of poor quality, revealing only a damaged part of the painting or, in rare cases, the piece and its assailant. The documenting of these actions has never been done in such an elaborate manner, with perfect frontal views of the scene” (Bessette & Bessette, 2022). This awareness means that

the selected works become part of a new production or a choreographic ritual that constitutes living tableaux very aware of the media's objectives. As the activists themselves state in their press releases, the subjects are chosen according to precise logics; for instance, Andy Warhol's painted car is targeted as a symbol of pollution, the Laocoön as one who tried to save himself and all, and in most cases, the attacked paintings represent nature (Ultima Generazione 2022; 2022b).

Beyond mere communication, the activists' actions delve deeply into some historical-critical questions and represent a significant outcome of the long debate that has highlighted art and activism over the past thirty years. By claiming and describing targeted artistic choices combined with a goal of raising awareness about environmental issues, activists are able to craft actions that oscillate between ethics and aesthetics, without conclusively settling into either domain.

What is striking is that, in line with contemporary art trends, beauty is not at the center of their interests. On the contrary, they cover and, in a sense, negate the beauty of cultural heritage, whether it be paintings or architecture. Conducting actions primarily against ancient works makes their actions appear violent, as an indisputable act leaving an indelible mark in the minds of those observing these actions through videos and newspapers.

To some extent, the activists' momentary eclipse of beauty firmly recalls Arthur Danto's position, who, in his book *The Abuse of Beauty*, published in 2003, writes: "What I oppose, however, is the idea that the history of appreciation always ends up as the appreciation of beauty" (Danto, 2003).

Danto, in fact, positions himself against an exclusively aestheticized view of art, against art conceived as noble entertainment, in order to emphasize a renewed alignment of art and artists with social and, in a way, ethical issues. Regarding the Whitney Biennial, Danto states that it functioned to "provide knowledge of what American artists had accomplished in the previous two years. Those attending the 1993 Biennial expected to understand and, to some extent, that's what they got: they learned that American artists were deeply engaged in the fight against injustices related to race, class, and gender in America. (...) The implication is that you should not only look at what we, the artists, have done: you should help us change the world" (Danto, 2003).

Beyond the reflection on the end of art developed by Danto, I have not chosen to mention the American critic to argue that contemporary art has a new purpose compared to previous eras but rather to highlight that activists are implementing a kind of rejection of beauty to attack the dominant cultural model.

Activists smear artworks and make us experience the end of beauty to criticize and awaken the minds of those in society who do not recognize the environmental problem. They attack the rhetoric of beauty to draw attention to another issue and invoke a change in attitude and, perhaps, paradigm. Thus, the issue is not artistic but climatic. The artworks are merely the vehicle to highlight the injustices and errors of a Western rhetoric that does not care about the environment but rather seems to revel in and be satisfied with the contemplation of nature's representation.

It is to this type of indignation that museums are called to respond. Are museum institutions merely places for the conservation of objects and the status quo? Or are they places that can help society to change and improve?

The New Definition of Museum and the Ethical Turning Point of ICOM

It is crucial to briefly trace the origins of ICOM to understand that from 1946, for fifty years, there was no need to modify the definition of a museum, while within the span of a decade, we have reached the third revision. Laura Raicovich, former director of the Queens Museum in New York, notes that in 2019, the proposed new definition was rejected as being ideological by the national delegations of ICOM called to vote. Terms such as “contributing to human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary well-being” (ICOM, 2019) were among those rejected, as Raicovich argues they would have conferred a more political role on the museum (Raicovich, 2021).

Is it possible to present objects that speak for themselves and create a completely objective narrative? Can culture truly be dissociated from politics? Can a cultural institution exist that plays a neutral role in society?

For the 2022 version, one might assume that the good intentions of the previously rejected definition were condensed into the term “ethical” to mitigate the impact of certain more loaded words. It is also evident that the term “ethical,” used in isolation and without further clarification, appears as an attractive phrase but is largely ineffective in practice, seeming almost to become a decorative element in the statement. There exists an ethical code from ICOM, but its pages primarily refer to the ethical behavior of its officials rather than to the management practices of museums (ICOM, 2009).

All the words employed in the new definition serve as indicators of justice; the meaning of each sentence and each word underscores the good that the museum accomplishes for individuals and for society as a whole. The rhetorical use of these terms communicates solely that all museum actions are aimed at the betterment of humanity. No ICOM definition has ever explicitly considered the museum as a pivot of the economy, for example.

Moreover, it is important to consider that ICOM is an international organization composed of “115 national committees” (ICOM, 2024). This means that ICOM exerts a homogenizing power, as if the published definitions correspond to the principles by which it converts existing museums or encourages the creation of new ones, engaging in a form of indoctrination and evangelization of museums on a global scale. In this regard, it is interesting to examine the particular relationship between ICOM Arab and ICOM. ICOM Arab is defined as a “Regional Alliance of Arab countries,” a partnership that, on one hand, seems to fit within the Western framework of ICOM, but, on the other hand, maintains a degree of distance (ICOM, n.d.). These examples prompt reflection on the fact that ICOM is not merely an agent of disseminating a uniform museum model; it also appears to believe that its definitions can be interpreted in the same manner across the globe.

The idea that all human beings should belong to the same society has its origins in Enlightenment thought. Indeed, it was during this period that the utilitarian ethical philosophy of Jeremy Bentham began to develop. This British thinker argues that in order to achieve a just society, it is necessary to apply the principle of utility—that is, to maximize happiness in order to attain pleasure and, consequently, to eliminate pain.

Similarly, ICOM seems to engage in a comparable reflection when formulating and publishing the 2022 definition of the museum, having developed a process of surveys and votes according to the logic of employing “the words and key concepts most widely shared by the international community” (ICOM Italia, 2022b). This directly echoes Bentham’s sentiments in the eighteenth century: if something is deemed just for many people and represents the good for the majority of the community, then it is considered just, thereby excluding mi-

nority perspectives. Thus, in the absence of further explanations from ICOM regarding its understanding of the term “ethical,” we can deduce that the adopted approach is most likely utilitarian.

In his essay *The Vocation of Politics*, Max Weber observes that an ethics based on principles—such as utilitarian ethics—can be likened to a religious action, meaning an action guided by beliefs that are largely indifferent to consequences (Weber, 2001). The German sociologist thus highlights that good actions or principles cannot produce or yield only good results: “one who acts according to the ethics of principles feels ‘responsible’ only for ensuring that the flame of pure principle—such as the flame of protest against the injustice of the social order—does not extinguish. Continuously rekindling it is the aim of their actions, which are entirely irrational from the perspective of possible outcomes” (Weber, 2001).

Although ICOM seeks to project a neutral image of museums, they can never be regarded as such. In other words, the apparent neutrality is the means by which power infiltrates museums, creating an illusion of independence through the rhetoric of preservation, a civic duty that seems to evade any political affiliation. However, this is insufficient to generate good; good actions alone do not suffice to establish justice; rather, they underscore the risk of disseminating universal principles that inevitably come into conflict with diverse contextual realities.

As Glicenstein suggests, drawing on the sociological work of American studies such as those by Howard Becker and Erving Goffman, it is essential to consider that museum institutions participate in a social game that extends beyond the mere presentation of artworks, maintaining a series of relationships and connections that reach beyond their walls (Glicenstein, 2009, p. 151). All these relationships, often conveniently overlooked, inevitably influence our perception and cannot be ignored when providing an adequate reading of these spaces and what they contain.

The museum cannot be neutral, even regarding the words that define it, as it is action that imparts meaning to those words. While ICOM refers to a “non-profit” institution and, in some cases, admission is free, numerous other sectors economically benefit from museums (Symbola, 2023). Raicovich succinctly summarized in 2020 the contradictions of an illusory neutrality in museums by stating that: “museums are spaces that represent past and present stories of oppression, repression, and suffering, while simultaneously proclaiming to offer solace, beauty, communion, and art for all” (Raicovich, 2022). Thus, the American curator and activist illuminates a Western perspective in which the museum is conceived and suggests a reflection on significant issues, such as the habitual exhibition of works depicting scenes of gender violence, akin to the story of Daphne, a young girl transformed into a plant to escape the god Apollo.

Obviously, all disturbing aspects have been ignored, and no answers are provided to a series of questions that immediately conflict with an ethical approach and with other present terms: how should we address artworks that represent actual spoils of the imperialist wars of Western states? How should we handle artworks illustrating sexual violence?

Focusing the questions on our case study, we must thus inquire: how should we position ourselves in relation to climate activists who engage in actions aligned with their ethical principles within a public space such as the museum? How should museums relate to activists who transgress the hierarchies upon which these institutions are founded to convey a message of respect for the environment, the health of our planet, and our own future?

The First Response of ICOM to Climate Activists' Actions

In the second half of 2022, the surge in activist actions rapidly became the leading news story in the media, and in a very short time, the figure of the activist was supplanted by that of the vandal. In November 2022, ICOM responded, along with museums that condemned the activists for endangering artworks: "ICOM draws attention to the impact that these demonstrations could have on the work of museum professionals and volunteers who strive to protect and promote these valuable cultural assets for the enjoyment of the public" (ICOM, 2022b). Approximately one hundred international museums signed this statement (Ansa, 2022), likely astonished and frightened by the systematic nature of these actions, as well as by the precision and effectiveness with which they were organized.

While ICOM refers to an alliance, seemingly aligning itself with the activists, it neither elaborates on nor proposes a strategy. It positions itself alongside them while remaining impartial, offering no further comments following this initial declaration. Subsequently, national committees will express their views and decide how to address the issue, but no additional clarifications come from the central office to lend a more precise meaning to this phantom alliance.

In my view, this declaration of alliance remains deliberately undefined, perhaps in the hope that the situation will stabilize quickly, thereby avoiding the necessity of adopting a clear and likely divisive line to be uniformly imposed on all ICOM member countries. The International Council of Museums emphasizes its role in safeguarding and protecting culture, as if their actions could truly be detached from political and economic powers. However, it is evident that reality does not present itself in this manner; on the contrary, researchers have already highlighted this (Janes and Sandell, 2019; Murawski, 2021), and as we have noted through the words of Laura Raicovich, the definition of the museum developed by ICOM in 2019 was rejected precisely because it was deemed too politicized. Instead, museums seek to present themselves to the public as neutral spaces, both as interchangeable environments, akin to the white cube (O'Doherty, 2012), and politically, as completely free spaces, following the American museum model where institutions appear wholly free and independent from any form of power.

The fundamental problem of this situation—namely, the ethical manner in which museums should conduct themselves and relate to climate activists from Just Stop Oil and Last Generation—must be resolved by the national committees of ICOM. In the following paragraph, I will attempt to demonstrate how weak and inappropriate it is to assert that museums should behave universally across every latitude on the globe, without considering the relationships these institutions maintain with the contexts in which they operate.

The Italian Reactions

Contrary to the assertions made in the central section's bulletin, ICOM Italia states that "as museum professionals, we must express a position opposed to this manner of conducting legitimate protests for climate and environmental purposes" (ICOM Italia, 2022). This statement aligns with those initially articulated by ICOM's central office, with the distinction that the latter presents itself as an ally of the activists (ICOM, 2022b), while in Italy, such support does not manifest. On the contrary, a posture increasingly characterized by the defense of artworks, marked by aggression and repression, is adopted.

Given the total lack of news or press releases from museums reporting actual damage to the artworks they house, it is reasonable to assume that no substantial harm has been

inflicted. Nevertheless, in Italy, considerable anger is unleashed both within institutions and among the public against the “vandals.” As activists continue to glue themselves to Botticelli’s *Venus*, the pedestal of the *Laocoön*, and Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, and even chain themselves to the balustrade of Giotto’s *Scrovegni Chapel*, without causing damage to the artworks, they are labeled as public dangers. One of them, Simone Ficicchia, is even prosecuted under the same legislation typically applied in Italy to indict mobsters and terrorists. The only reported “damage” occurred in Milan, where the restoration of the *Arco della Pace*, following a simple cleaning, is expected to cost the municipality 30,000, according to local newspaper reports (Vazzana, 2023). Furthermore, the same amount has been cited for cleaning Florence’s *Palazzo Vecchio* (Ansa, 2023) due to the activists’ actions, who were directly attacked by the mayor himself. The images of the spectacle orchestrated by Dario Nardella, the mayor of Florence, circulated worldwide, undoubtedly reinforcing the public association between activists and vandals in Italy. In any case, it is appropriate to speak of economic damage, but in no way of physical harm inflicted on the artworks.

At this point, one must pose the following question: if the artworks suffer no damage, if one can discern a certain artistic reflection in the execution of the activists’ actions, and if the museum is to be “in service to the citizens”—as stipulated by ICOM’s latest definition of a museum—why do museums adopt a stance unfavorable to the activists?

Before providing an answer, it is essential to clarify that during the year when the activists’ actions began, in 2022, Italy was governed by a far-right conservative party. It is perhaps not incidental that in ICOM Italia’s communication, the term “activists” is not even mentioned; rather, there is reference to an “active position of youth” (ICOM Italia, 2022). Beyond the few instances that seek to deeply interrogate the motivations behind the activists’ actions, it is imperative to consider the fact that we are dealing with a far-right government that came to power with the stated intention of “conquering culture” promoting irresponsible mass tourism, proposing amendments to increase its influence over appointments to the board of the *Centro sperimentale di Cinematografia di Cinecittà* (Monti, 2023)—just to name a few examples—and that is primarily concerned with the conservation and well-being of artworks, displaying a clearly extractive attitude toward culture.

It is therefore evident that the current Italian government perceives heritage exclusively as a tool to be controlled and managed within a profit-oriented perspective. In Italy, culture undeniably plays a crucial role as a driver of an economy that surpasses mere cultural consumption: consider tourism, transportation, or *Made in Italy* (Symbola, 2023). Heritage attracts a significant number of tourists, and it seems clear that while it must be preserved for humanity, it must also serve to safeguard economic interests.

The first initiative of the Italian government occurs on April 11, 2023, when Minister Gennaro Sangiuliano announces the approval by the Italian Council of Ministers of a new bill, stating that “attacks on monuments and artistic sites cause economic damage to the community. (...) According to the data provided to me by the Special Superintendency of Rome, the restoration of the façade of the Senate cost 40,000” (Sangiuliano, 2023). The Minister does not even mention the artworks in museums, as they have evidently not been materially damaged; in the absence of concrete harm, the focus shifts to economic losses. In effect, the political power adopts a repressive stance in order to protect what lies within museums, taking a markedly different position from the initial declaration issued by ICOM.

The situation is quite different in Germany, where on March 21, 2023—one month prior to the Italian state’s repressive initiatives—climate activists from *Letzte Generation* (Last

Generation) conducted a performance in collaboration with ICOM Germany during International Museum Day. This performance was executed simultaneously in numerous museums, including the Hamburger Kunsthalle, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Ethnological Museum in Leipzig, the Zeppelin Museum in Friedrichshafen, the Art Gallery of Rostock, the European Hansemuseum in Lübeck, and the Museum of Communication in Nuremberg (Lawson-Tancred, 2023). This performance, in the form of a continuous reading of the themes promoted by the activists, invites us to consider the museum as a “place of society.” While this German initiative appears as a fair opening, it risks diluting the political message of the activists. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that German museums have engaged in dialogue with the activists, serving as a conduit for their ideas.

Conversely, in Italy, although ICOM’s national office initially declared its support for the activists’ cause (ICOM Italia, 2022), it never opened a dialogue and, instead, significantly intensified repression.

The activists’ protest continues, and a crucial moment for understanding the Italian situation occurs a few months later, in November 2023. During the preliminary hearing (designated for minor offenses), the Florence Court decides not to prosecute the activists who had glued themselves to the glass of Botticelli’s *Venus at the Uffizi*, stating that “the fact does not exist” (*Il Post*, 2023). Francesca Trasatti, the defense attorney for the activists, remarks: “it will also be necessary to evaluate more carefully in the future whether the behaviors in question fall within the broad domain of free expression of thought rather than constituting an offense as has been formally established today” (*Il Post*, 2023). It is clear that we are witnessing an expression of free thought, an aspect that a museum—and, above all, ICOM—should protect. However, to transform the activists’ actions into actual offenses, the political process accelerates, and the bill comes into effect in January 2024, barely more than a month later. Although some voices have been raised in opposition, the law is adopted with “138 votes in favor, 92 against, and 10 abstentions” (Redazione, 2024).

“The hegemony of security against democracy” is the headline of the newspaper *Il Manifesto*, which explains that the approval of the “eco-vandal” law corresponds to the “delegitimization and criminalization of dissent” (Algotino, 2024). This law imposes strong and targeted repression against actions that have caused no damage to cultural heritage, while clearly implying the contrary: “from now on, those who cause damage to cultural and landscape heritage will be required to pay the full cost of restoration,” states Sangiuliano, Minister of Culture (Montagnoli, 2024). He adds: “the adopted provision stipulates fines much higher than those previously in place, ranging from 20,000 to 60,000, for those who ‘destroy, disperse, deteriorate, or render totally or partially unusable or inaccessible cultural or landscape assets, whether they belong to themselves or to others.’ For those who deface, vandalize, or subject cultural assets to harmful or incompatible uses with their historical or artistic character, the administrative penalty will range from 10,000 to 40,000. The proceeds will be allocated to the Ministry of Culture for the restoration of damaged assets” (Montagnoli, 2024).

I argue that the individual who should truly face sanctions is Minister Sangiuliano, who relocated Caravaggio’s *Bacchus* and the *Bacchus* attributed to Guido Reni from the Uffizi Galleries to transport them to Vinitaly. The Minister brought these two paintings, which depict *Bacchus*, to the national wine fair in Verona as part of an exhibition featuring only these works. These artworks were put at risk—likely due to the high costs of transportation—essentially serving as a backdrop for a press conference. It is important to recall that the Uffizi

Galleries, which lent these works, are part of ICOM, leading us to conclude that this action violates both ethical and professional standards regarding the use of heritage. It appears that the paintings can be employed to glorify the history of Italian wine, but not to support environmental causes.

The Italian union *Mi riconosci? Sono un professionista dei beni culturali* has condemned the weakness of the justifications that led the Minister to such actions, asserting that the paintings representing Bacchus are “something that attracts much attention, associating wine and culture, and the narrative behind a product, wine” (*Mi riconosci?*, 2024). Furthermore, the union rightly emphasizes that “none of the reasons for lending [the works, as indicated] in the Guidelines for the Authorization of Loans of Works of Art (approved by ministerial decree on January 28, 2008, pursuant to Article 48, paragraph 3, of Legislative Decree 42/2004) are evident,” and especially reminds us that “Caravaggio’s Bacchus is listed in the ‘List of Immovable Works’ of the Uffizi, compiled and transmitted to the Ministry of Culture on September 22, 2022” (*Mi riconosci?*, 2024). Thus, the two Bacchus paintings were displayed at Vinitaly at the Ministry’s behest, and it would be interesting to receive a response from ICOM Italy regarding how they intend to uphold a “professional and ethical” stance, as stipulated by the new definition in 2022.

Returning to the issue of activists, a concrete example of the unjustified repression exercised by the Italian state is illustrated by the condemnation on August 18, 2022, by the Vatican Court of the individual documenting the action and the two other activists who glued themselves to the base of the Laocoon at the Vatican Museums. They were sentenced to nine months in prison, along with fines of 1,500 for each of the participants and 120 for the individual filming. This penalty, already severe given the absence of any damage to the artworks, was compounded by the enactment of the new “eco-vandal” law, imposing a fine of 15,000 on the two activists based on an arbitrary assessment. It is therefore undeniable that the matter has become entirely political, leaving museums voiceless. Indeed, no response to this absurd law has come from Italian museums, nor from ICOM. The ICOM definition, which describes the museum as a place “at the service of society,” loses its significance if the institutions involved do not attempt to uphold this principle, either out of indifference or because the state opposes certain civic actions.

The situation recalls the words of Michel Foucault, who might attribute this episode to a monarchical dynamic, where “punishment must be spectacular to instill fear in others” (Perrot, 1997). Additionally, the display of the two Bacchus paintings at Vinitaly necessitated the constant presence of two military police officers to protect the works from activists—a phenomenon also observed at the Uffizi for some time. This reveals how the activists’ message has been distorted and instrumentalized to justify the adoption of a new repressive law.

These events raise questions about the actual effectiveness and utility of ICOM in such circumstances: no warnings have been issued regarding Italian conduct, nor has any statement or discussion taken place. The international association has remained neutral, and—in the silence of Italian museums—it was only following controversies surrounding the ambiguous role of an alleged assistant-lover that Sangiuliano chose to resign in the fall of 2024 (*Il Post*, 2024).

Rather than providing answers, what emerges are additional questions: how should ICOM ensure that its members adhere to expectations? And based on what ethical principles? Perhaps this explains the lack of a precise definition of the term “ethics,” preserving the necessary neutrality for the survival of the transnational entity. The rhetoric insists that

the museum is a place of good for society, while the state, in defending its museums, resorts solely to punishing its citizens. In other words, the Italian museum appears incapable of applying ethical principles, except under the influence of the state or existing powers.

Conclusion

The model of an ethical museum that lacks the capacity to fundamentally question its foundations while striving to maintain neutrality and openness to all possible influences is ineffective—whether those pressures originate from a right-wing or left-wing government. This reflection leads us to understand that the American museum model, where everything appears free and independent, is merely an illusion: where political agendas do not exert control, it is undoubtedly economic power that determines outcomes.

The contrast between the German and Italian reactions underscores the impossibility of adopting an ethical approach based on universal assumptions. The responses from these two countries are diametrically opposed: one is open to dialogue, while the other adopts a more repressive stance, demonstrating that each context responds to its own contingencies, ultimately interpreting the principles established in the new definition of the museum from 2022 in its own way. As Max Weber suggests, an ethics based on principles can only render political reflection dormant and impede inquiries into whether one is acting justly.

It would therefore be pertinent to update, in light of contemporary urgencies, the ideas of the German sociologist and to discuss an ethics of responsibility that focuses on the “(foreseeable) consequences of one’s own actions” (Weber, 2001). Indeed, the term responsibility etymologically derives from “response” and implies being accountable for one’s actions with an awareness of the consequences. Fundamentally, this involves a form of action that considers realities, particularly the diverse realities present in the world, whether social or environmental. Abandoning the perspective of defending universal convictions in favor of focusing on actual repercussions means making choices with consideration for others, not merely oneself: “there is no ethics without responsibility,” as Hannah Arendt writes (Forti, 1999).

It is therefore time to promote approaches aimed at decolonizing museums from ideologies and visions that are exclusively Western (Lonetree, 2012; Knudsen, Oldfield and Buetner, 2022) and to reevaluate the convictions upon which the Western Museum rests today. There is an urgent need to liberate museums from the illusory neutrality that keeps them under control. However, it would already be a significant first step to ensure that institutions and museums—especially in Italy—act responsibly toward their citizens.

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