

## Museums and a common world: climate change, cosmopolitics, museum practice

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### Abstract

At stake in this paper is the nature of the relationship between the institution of the museum and the common world. It is contended that such relations are regularly asserted through cosmopolitan appeals, which are premised on the assumption that a cosmos, a world, a universal, pre-exists its articulation, and, that it is the task of reason and of science to adjust the citizen-subject to this already-present condition. This paper argues that this is a flawed position because it assumes, in fact, what is required to be built: a world in common. In defence of this proposition, two recent declarations of museum cosmopolitanism are explored: ICOM's declaration on the 'universal museum', which focuses on the unity of the cultural heritage of humankind; and the Buffon Declaration, which concerns institutions of natural history and the imperilment of humanity's biospheric inheritance. Subsequently, the paper turns to what might be called the empirics of the cosmopolitanism of the museum visitor. This examines the qualitative investigation of banal or everyday cosmopolitanism, which is largely ignored by such museum declarations. These different museological articulations of a common world are, in turn, reviewed through the juxtaposition of two sociologies: Ulrich Beck's cosmopolitanism and Bruno Latour's compositionism. It is in contrasting these various mobilizations of the cosmopolitan – the museological, the empirical and the sociological – that the paper advances its proposition: namely, that these cosmopolitan claims are based on the assumption that a common world exists prior to its assemblage as such.

**Key words:** Common world, cosmopolitics, cosmopolitanism, museum practice, climate change

### Introduction

Writing in the wake of the 2007 publication of the proceedings of the International Panel on Climate Change, museum curator Richard Hebda (2007: 329) contended:

This report is nothing short of a wake-up call that humanity's course is unsustainable and has depleted not only the resources we use, but also impacted the very processes that sustain us and all other life on earth. Humanity is at a crossroad and museums have a vital role in helping people make informed decisions about which turn to take.

In many ways, Hebda's is a compelling proposition. It is also pause for thought. This has less to do with the claim that museums ought to take up the challenge of climate change – without doubt this is vitally important as it is for innumerable other institutions – and rather more to do with how they might do so. Central here is the understanding of the nature of the relationship between the institution of the museum and the shared world that its pedagogy would negotiate. It is this relation between museums and a common world that is my concern here. The contention of this paper is that such relations are regularly asserted through cosmopolitan

appeals which are premised on the assumption that a cosmos, a world, a universal pre-exists its articulation; and, that it is the task of reason and of science to adjust the citizen-subject to this already present condition. This paper argues that this is a flawed position because it assumes in fact what is required to be built: a world in common.

In defence of this proposition, I juxtapose two contrasting proposals by which the relation between museums and a common world might be explored: one cosmopolitan, the other cosmopolitical. The former is a term that invokes an extensive and nuanced literature to which this paper can do no justice. Rather, for my purposes here, focus is limited to relations between cosmopolitanism and global risk as they are formulated in the sociology of Ulrich Beck. Partly, I do this because of the significance of his scholarship, and partly because of the utility of his arguments for the analysis of climate change (Beck 2010a; 2010b; also see Hulme 2010). The latter, the cosmopolitical, concerns formulations from science studies, particularly those of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, which, while largely overlooked by the former literature, highlight among other things the anthropocentrism of cosmopolitan positions that fail to register the politics of the nonhuman through which a common world might be composed.

As an entry into these considerations, I begin with two recent expressions of museum cosmopolitanism which have taken the form of declarations: ICOM's declaration on the 'universal museum' and its focus on the unity of the cultural heritage of humankind; and the Buffon Declaration, which concerns institutions of natural history and the imperilment of humanity's biospheric inheritance. Both of these museum manifestos might be framed as cosmopolitan proposals. This is so, in as much as they share a museum pedagogics – via, respectively, strategies of tolerance and sustainability – that would adjust citizen-subjects to shared cultural or ecological worlds that are posited beyond the borders of the nation-state. Subsequently, I turn to what might be called the empirics of cosmopolitanism. This concerns the qualitative investigation of banal or everyday cosmopolitanism, which is largely ignored by museum manifestos of cosmopolitanism and the social theory of global risk; but which, nevertheless, is assumed by such formulations if the political effect of their claims is to hold. It is in contrasting these various mobilizations of the cosmopolitan – the museological, the sociological and the empirical – that I develop the proposition of this paper: namely, that cosmopolitan claims are based on the assumption that a common world exists prior to its assemblage as such.

## Two museum manifestos

For many of its contemporary interlocutors, the modern public museum has its beginnings in the early expansive thrust of modernity and stands as the bastion of Enlightenment reason. For example, Geoffrey Lewis writes the 'idea of universality can be found at the heart of the first public museums' (Lewis 2004: 40). He continues, 'A product of world exploration and developing global trade among the maritime nations of Western Europe, these museums reflected the spirit of inquiry and enterprise of their age' (2004: 40). Similarly, James Cuno locates the formation of the modern museum in 'the polymathic ideal of the Enlightenment' (2008: 123). While such accounts are inclined to gloss the complexities of the histories of the emergence of modern museums – which are, of course, cross cut with those of different national formations, different experiences of imperial expansion, and contending knowledge practices that must necessarily qualify such accounts (see Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett, 1995) – these statements are not, however, primary for the purpose of historical analysis. Rather, they are expressive of the politics of particular present practices: in this case the defence of 'the universal museum'.

For example, it is Cuno's contention that this institution is imbued with a legacy that will serve us well in the present, for it introduces 'us to the larger world of which we are a part [and is] ... based on the eighteenth-century ideal of cosmopolitanism: "citizen of the cosmos", of the world, the universe' (2008: 124). In a context of rapid globalization and reactionary religious fundamentalisms and ethnic nationalisms, he contends that it is precisely this cosmopolitan legacy of the museum that needs to be defended in the present. Cuno announces that museums ought to foster an openness to the world and, with it, the cultivation

of both the sense of humankind as heir to a single shared world heritage and a tolerance for its diversity. In this, he finds the cosmopolitan idea of the museum virtuous: 'it is good for us, for our species, to experience the full diversity of human cultural industry in order to better understand our place in the world, as of but one culture and one time among many' (2008: 123).

Notwithstanding the problematic slippage between the universal and the cosmopolitan, it is ICOM's Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (2006) that is regularly figured as the formal expression of this cosmopolitanism. Signed in 2002 by the directors of eighteen major institutions from Europe and North America, it asserted, 'Museums are agents in the development of culture ... we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation' (2006: 248). This position has won the approval of the prominent philosopher of cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah, who has written, 'However self-serving it may seem, the British Museum's claim to be a repository of the heritage not of Britain but of the world strikes me as exactly right' (2006: 2).<sup>11</sup> Yet, as the tension in Appiah's statement indicates, this is a controversial position. As others have contended, such cosmopolitan arguments, deployed to demolish the claims of cultural property appropriation made against majority museums, close dialogue between the museum and postcolonial communities with investments in its artefacts. Rather than an opening to the other and its potentially disruptive presence, cosmopolitanism in this context becomes a ruse for shoring up prior claims of patrimony in the form of the metropolitan custodianship of world heritage – a position Andrew McClellan (2009) terms 'Cosmocharlatanism'.

This position might be juxtaposed with The Buffon Declaration: Natural History Institutions and the Environmental Crisis (2007). In 2007, representatives of 93 natural history institutions – natural history museums, research institutes, botanic gardens and zoos – from 36 countries, convened in Paris. As the appellation makes clear in its homage to the eighteenth-century French naturalist, the signatory institutions position themselves in the Enlightenment heritage to which claims for the universal museum made their appeal. However, the declaration is concerned not with the preservation of cultural diversity in the interests of the common heritage of humankind, but with the protection of the planet's biodiversity on which 'our common future' depends. Concomitantly, its cosmopolitan ethos targets behaviour, in this case, not for a tolerance of cultural diversity, but for the sustainability of biodiversity. Here, the signatories agreed that their institutions 'are a forum for direct engagement with civil society, which is indispensable for helping bring about the changes of behaviour on which our common future and the future of nature depend' (2007: n.p.). Similarly to the declaration on the universal museum, this document seeks to work against particular property claims in the interests of commonality. In this case, the enclosure of biodiversity in the form of bioprospecting. The Buffon Declaration calls on 'governments and the Convention on Biological Diversity: to recognize the difference between profit-oriented bioprospecting and science-oriented research for the public good, and – to facilitate non-commercial biodiversity collecting and the movement of specimens' (2007: n.p.).

However, the cosmopolitan position motivating these documents would seem to have rather different politics. That is, if we are to believe Robert Janes, who – in registering his preference for the position taken by the Buffon Declaration over the declaration on universal museums – finds that the former demonstrates 'an explicit interest ... in trying to make a difference', and, the latter, 'an ethnocentric [manifesto] and colonial relic' (2009: 85).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in as much as these two recent museological expressions of the cosmopolitan share particular assumptions about the common world to which we – citizens of the cosmos – are to be adjusted with tolerance and sustainability, there is a sense in which the Buffon Declaration perhaps too shares in a cosmocharlatanism. This is so, but not quite in the sense that McClellan intends it, rather these particular proposals entertain a more widely shared feature of cosmopolitan claims: namely, the (self) deception that a cosmos, a world, a universe, pre-exists its articulation as such; and, that the task of reason and of science is to adjust the cosmopolitan citizen to this already present condition. It is via a theoretical cum empirical detour that I come to launch a defence of the contention that it is the work of reason to accommodate the citizen-subject to an already existing common world.

### Global risk and cosmopolitanization

Intrinsic to these museological expressions of the cosmopolitan is a concern with the threats and risks to the common world in whose service the museum would put itself. That is, the universal museum positions itself as a precaution against terrorism and sectarian violence that threatens the prospect of universal peace; while the Buffon Declaration works against the threat to the biosphere that global modernity's environmental crisis presents to life and its 'common future'. The work of the social theorist, Ulrich Beck, is useful here in holding these concerns in a single analytical vista, in particular his reworking – through the optic of cosmopolitanism – of his well-known thesis on 'risk society'. Beck's formulations on global risk make regular reference to terrorism and the ecological crisis among a plethora of other contingencies of global modernity, including nuclear accidents, environmental pollution, biotech hazards, climate change and financial crises (Beck 1992; 1999; 2008). As the unintended consequences of modernization, what these 'manufactured uncertainties' share is a threat of catastrophe whose global scale renders their risks not only beyond the control of any one nation-state, but incalculable and irreparable in their consequences. Pertinent to my argument is Beck's thesis on the political reflexivity of global risk.

Beck is concerned with the prospects for transnational solidarities that emerge in the face of such risks. Risk, he contends, in late or reflexive modernity forms the basis of socialization through its capacity to construct 'risk communities' that transcend national boundaries. It is through such processes that the cosmopolitan possibilities of global risk lie. Because global risk escapes the human sensorium, this reflexivity is conditioned by the process of bringing risk to vision through publicized science. The 'intangibility of threats to civilization', Beck writes, 'only come to consciousness in scientized thought and cannot be directly related to primary experience' (1992: 52). 'Making the threats publicly visible and arousing attention in detail in one's own living space', he continues, provides the 'cultural eyes through which the "blind citizen" can perhaps win back the autonomy of their own judgment' (1992: 52).

In many ways, cosmopolitan museum proposals might be read as this 'making visible', of this restoration of citizenry vision through secular reason. This is clear enough in statements like the Buffon Declaration, in which a museum pedagogy is embarked upon that warns of the consequences of the environmental crisis and biodiversity lost. It is also true of the universal museum in as much as the project of world heritage and its unitary subject, humankind, are positioned to work against the various fundamentalisms that threaten to fragment that subject with explosive violence. It is by bringing these risks to vision that the museum comes to advocate the prophylactics of tolerance and sustainability through which a common world is to be both acknowledged and protected. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that Beck is writing against the idealist tradition – to which I might claim these two museological declarations are heirs – and so too of the top-down expressions of cosmopolitanism they deploy. In this he turns to Marx.

It is not insignificant that the text on which Beck draws echoes Marx's reflections on the modern exhibitionary edifice. Writing on the Great Exhibition, 1851, Marx and Engels observed, 'This exhibition is a striking proof of the concentrated power with which modern large-scale industry is everywhere demolishing national barriers and increasingly blurring local peculiarities of production, society and national character among all peoples' (Marx and Engels 1850). This statement resonates with those made in *The Communist Manifesto*; here Marx and Engels contend, 'the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country ... National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible' (Marx and Engels 1952 [1848]: 46-7). In this context, then, if according to the Mansion House resolution, the Great Exhibition 'was expected to inaugurate universal peace' (Spencer 1971: 210), it was for Marx and Engels an event that exemplified the cosmopolitanizing effect of the emergence of a world market that would overcome national parochialism. It is on this notion of cosmopolitanism as a material consequence of the process of globalization that Beck draws. Formally, this is developed in the concept of 'enforced cosmopolitanization' (Beck 2007: 287). It is to this dynamic of global risk that I think we might recruit the current expressions of museological cosmopolitanism.

Beck juxtaposes this cosmopolitanization concept with normative ideas of cosmopolitanism. Countering notions that pose cosmopolitanism as a political project – as, for instance, a task to order the world as in Kant’s ‘constitution establishing world citizenship’ (cited in Linklater 2007: 117), or, as the critical horizon from which to hold the present to account in the form of cosmopolitan democracy as a ‘necessary utopia’<sup>33</sup> – Beck turns to Marx. This is, in the sense that he too reads cosmopolitanization as a ‘side effect’ of globalization, enforced on subjects by the actualities that the social processes of a globalizing world imposes on them. However, in his ‘Cosmopolitan Manifesto’ Beck draws a distinction with the 1848 text in that the former is ‘about transnational-national conflict’ and the social inequalities of risk; the latter, about class contradiction (1999: 14). For Beck, while, enforced cosmopolitanization gives the lie to the territorial integrity of the nation state, rupturing national borders with a cultural *mélange*, its social dynamic concerns subject positions in relation to risk, not class. Beck (2007:287) writes:

Global risks tear down national boundaries and jumble together the native with the foreign. The distant other is becoming the inclusive other. Everyday life is becoming cosmopolitan. Human beings must find a meaning of life in the exchange with others and no longer in the encounter with the like ... global risks activate and connect actors across borders, who otherwise don’t want to have anything to do with one another ... [It] opens our eyes to the uncontrollable liabilities that something might happen to us, might befall us.

On Beck’s account, then, cosmopolitanization is a side effect of a world of global risk that solicits the recognition of ‘a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no outside, no other’ (Beck 2010a: 178).

Current expressions of museological cosmopolitanism might usefully be located in this dynamic. That is, as one that finds its momentum less in the eighteenth century philosophical tradition on which its interlocutors rhetorically draw, but in the actual processes of globalization that increasingly imperil the common world in whose service the cosmopolitan museum stands. It is to these threats to human civilization that the museum’s expertise would draw public attention; be it a universal cultural heritage or a global biospheric inheritance jeopardized by the unintended consequences of a globalizing world. It is to this world that these projects would insist there is no outside, no other.

### **Banal cosmopolitanism and the empirics of the museum visitor**

The possibility of a constituency for this world – of a world or global citizenship – would seem to be contingent on forms of everyday cosmopolitanism by which subjects are open to a common world and its obligations. However, neither cosmopolitan museum manifestos nor social theories of global risk offer much purchase on the empirics of this banal cosmopolitanism. In this, they supply no particular insight into ‘the cosmopolitan disposition’ that might shape ordinary, everyday subjectivities on which their formulations depend – it would seem necessarily – for their political effect. A number of studies in the fields of sociology and museum studies have investigated the possibility of such a disposition in qualitative studies of metropolitan subjects in advanced capitalist societies. Drawing on these analyses, I want to suggest that there is a problem that such empirical accounts of cosmopolitanism share with the theoretical or programmatic formulations that they would supplement. This is so, in the sense that they too presume a common world. This time less as a philosophical imposition and more as an ethnographic quasi-question; that is, methodologically, they proceed by asking their respondents: ‘do you recognize this world?’ – all the while, it seems, in the full confidence of its presence. Among other things, this presumption neglects the human/nonhuman relations through which this shared world might come to be composed. In developing this contention, I turn to the notion of cosmopolitics, which underscores the anthropocentrism on which such cosmopolitan formulations come to rest.

In the sociological literature theoretical proclamations of the existence of an everyday or banal cosmopolitanism – as figured, for example, in Beck’s notion of enforced cosmopolitanization – have been met with the contention that these claims require empirical

substantiation. A number of studies have sought to measure the 'cosmopolitan dispositions' of the everyday. For example, John Urry and his colleagues have used focus groups to probe for cosmopolitan sentiment in northwest England. Exploring themes of mobility and cosmopolitanism, this research was pursued with the intention of investigating whether or not 'claims about contemporary cosmopolitanism are empirically significant' (Urry and Szerszynski, 2002: 471; see also Szerszynski and Toogood, 2000; Urry, 2003). More recently, Zlatko Skrbis and collaborators have conducted similar research in Brisbane, Australia, which has drawn out the ambivalence of 'ordinary cosmopolitanism' (Skrbis, Kendall, and Woodward 2004; Skrbis and Woodward 2007). These studies are instructive in their efforts to probe a cosmopolitan ordinariness and in their demonstration of the limits of its reach and the ambivalence of its deployment. Reporting on the findings of his study Urry (2003: 9) observed:

We found little evidence of what we had systematically hypothesised as the thesis of 'global citizenship' ... There was a strong awareness of the ... extended relations connecting them to other peoples, places and environments ... [Nevertheless] Respondents generally found it difficult to extend the taken-for-granted sense of moral connectedness that pertains in their more grounded communities to the larger and more abstract global community, since the latter seemed to lack the immediacy and groundedness ascribable to the former.

Summarizing their findings, Skrbis and Woodward (2007: 745-6) contended that:

ambivalence is a structural feature of the discourse of ordinary cosmopolitanism whereby individuals are making reflexive and deliberative judgments in relation to local and global domains ... Thus people become not simply more or less open and cosmopolitan, but they reservedly deployed their cosmopolitanism, thus allowing us to reconcile the frequently occurring gaps between people's philosophical commitment to cosmopolitan openness and often parochial practices.

While it would no doubt be rash to generalize from these studies, it is not only the claims of social theory that these findings complicate, they would also qualify those of the museum manifestos with which I am concerned. This is so, in as much as they would suggest that the cosmopolitan museum has an ambivalent audience for its claims of sustainability and tolerance with which it must negotiate. This, perhaps, is to make the obvious point that museological appeals for behaviour change in the interests of a common world are likely to be met with ambivalence. More importantly, it is also to acknowledge a dissensus, which suggests that, far from existing, a common world is yet to be composed.

Aspects of the empirical research for the 'Hot Science, Global Citizens: The Agency of the Museum Sector in Climate Change Interventions' could be read as supporting this contention.<sup>4</sup> This project conducted focus group research in Sydney, Melbourne and New Jersey in 2009. Part of that study was concerned specifically with the cosmopolitan dispositions of museum visitors as they are solicited in relation to the global risk posited by climate change. The aim, as stated in the brief for the research, was 'to understand respondents' sense of global connectivity of climate change' and their views on the responsibility to others 'given the uneven distribution of risk that it imposes.' Stimuli for discussion included the Greenpeace video, *A Future for Kiribati*, which focused on the inundation of those islands, and a paraphrasing of Nicholas Stern's contention that 'it is unjust that the poorest countries suffer the most even though they have contributed least to the causes of climate change' (Stern 2006: vi-vii). I give a brief report on the pertinent findings below.<sup>5</sup>

Respondents' perspectives of their relations to those others to whom they are spatially remote, which emerged in their discussions of the stimuli, were marked by ambivalence with regard to such others. For example, responses to the video oscillated between statements endorsing 'a humanitarian responsibility' that categorically claimed a responsibility for distant others and those that suggested a diminished responsibility. The latter were advanced on various grounds, including uncertainty that climate change was a genuine phenomenon; or, in the Australian groups, that other developed countries should have a



greater degree of responsibility, as Australia is only a small nation on the world stage. Other respondents simply withdrew care, contending, 'we've got to look after ourselves at the moment'. Such sentiments were particularly marked in the American context as respondents struggled with the impact of the unfolding global financial crisis on their own lives. For those who did express empathy for the inhabitants of Kiribati, the question of responsibility was met with perplexity and regret. Here, there was a general reflexivity about this sentiment in the focus groups. Respondents who felt compassion recognized it as a vacuous empathy, since they were not moved to action. One respondent contended that we are 'all guilty', we all 'lack empathy' at some point – highlighting, perhaps, the anthropological limit to care.

Critical to these limits for respondents were the issues of mediation and distance. For some, the video solicited a number of strategies to close the social distance between themselves and the subjects of the video. These included, inverting the relationship ('imagine if it was Bondi'); establishing a foreshortened temporality between here and there ('a remote island one day, the city the next'); identifying with a shared subject position ('a mother will sense [another] mother's suffering in another country'); and, by the universalising of the particular ('earth is that little island, there is nowhere else for us to go'). Other respondents viewed the Islanders' predicament as predictive, identifying their fate as 'our' horizon. As one discussant put it, that video shows 'where we are headed towards'. On the other hand, respondents commented that a media saturated with catastrophe generates not empathy but apathy. It produces a hierarchy of calamity by which one distances oneself from the suffering of others ('it's terrible ... but it's not as bad as...'). This led respondents to remark on the condition of compassion fatigue: you become 'complacent'. For some, the video generated neither empathy nor indifference to others, but rather concern for the self; that is for their own security and prosperity. In the negative, this was expressed as a latent fear of slipping into personal hardship and poverty. In the positive, it provided an affirmative assessment of one's present security, comfort and wealth: 'we're pretty lucky here'. In this, it seems that the mediation of distant suffering reminds respondents of their own vulnerability; while, simultaneously, providing them with 'the evasive reassurance that "worse things happen elsewhere"' (Cohen 2001: 20, cited in Chouliaraki 2008: 398).

While participants undoubtedly recognized and experienced themselves in terms of a globalized world, at least on some occasions, their commitments to the normative horizon of cosmopolitan belonging were marked by ambivalence. There is a discernible gap – on which respondents were often reflective – between their professed commitment to a cosmopolitan ethos and their particular modes of behaviour. Frequently, this is expressed as a perplexity in the face of the abstract nature of the climate crisis; or, with slightly less frequency, in a parochial defensiveness in the presence of seemingly overwhelming global forces. Either way, the concepts of global connectedness and responsibility that respondents did deploy seemed to be very firmly grounded in notions of proximate citizenship and belonging: of individual responsibility, of family, of locality. Indeed, to construct empathy for others that fall outside these categories, they engaged in strategies that brought them into this fold of the familiar. The results, then, reveal ambivalent cosmopolitans – ones who acknowledge that climate change creates profound obligations to distant others, yet identify with the need to defend current local interests; who recognize that something must be done, yet know not what to do; who oscillate between empathy and apathy, between complacency and fear.

In these data then, while there is a sense of global interconnectedness, this did not translate into modes of solidarity and responsibility signalled by the idea of cosmopolitan citizenship, of a belonging to a common world. Rather, subjects expressed a mixed relationship to this interconnectedness. It might be deduced that enforced cosmopolitanization offers no necessary relationship toward a cosmopolitan momentum; it is as likely to lead to parochial retreat as it is to cosmopolitan openness. Living with the materiality of globalization and its concomitant risks does not necessarily run to the recognition of, and identification with, a common world. It is here that I turn to the notion of the cosmopolitical, for it radically expands this dissensus on which the cosmopolitan settlement too rapidly forecloses.

### The Cosmopolitical

Bruno Latour has advanced this formulation in contexts pertinent to my argument, including in exchange with Beck (Latour 2004; also see Latour 2003); and in a curatorial capacity for the exhibition, 'Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy' (Latour and Weibel 2005). Interrogating Beck's formulations on cosmopolitanism, Latour argues that it is a thesis resting on an unacknowledged premise: that scientific reason will reveal the presence of an already existing world to which the cosmopolitan citizen is to be reconciled. For Latour, this is a flawed position. Beck, he writes,

does not realize ... that whenever cosmopolitanism has been tried out, from Alexandria to the United Nations, it has been during the great periods of complete confidence in the ability of reason and, later, science to know the one cosmos whose existence and solid certainty could then prop up all efforts to build the world metropolis of which we are all too happy to be citizens. The problem we face now is that it's precisely this 'one cosmos,' what I call mononaturalism, that has disappeared. (Latour 2004: 453)

On Latour's account, mononaturalism is the unnoticed premise to all cosmopolitan claims. It is this nature, as known to reason, that supplies the common ground by which all human action can be measured, and it is on this nature that cosmopolitan claims necessarily rely to justify their universality. It is, thus, the basis for the cosmopolitan settlement, where all humans come together as a political community in the 'we' that is the citizenry of the world. Such accounts suffer from 'anthropological blindness: nature, the world, the cosmos, is simply there; and since humans share basic characteristics, our view of the world is, at baseline, the same everywhere' (2004: 453). For Latour, then, cosmopolitanism is mistaken because it assumes precisely what is lacking: the one cosmos.

It is against this position that Latour advances the notion of cosmopolitics. This works to refuse the closure of politics to the exclusively human and to avoid the assumption of a pre-existing cosmos awaiting recognition. Drawing on Isabelle Stengers' formulations, Latour (2004: 454) writes:

The presence of cosmos in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of politics to mean the give-and-take in an exclusive human club. The presence of politics in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of cosmos to mean a finite list of entities that must be taken into account. Cosmos protects against the premature closure of politics, and politics against the premature closure of cosmos.

For Latour, politics concerns the ways in which the human and the nonhuman are assembled and the associations they form; while the cosmos, 'if it is to mean anything, must embrace, literally, everything—including all the vast numbers of nonhuman entities making humans act' (2004: 454). On this account, as one of his interlocutors puts it, 'all reality is political, but not all politics is human' (Harman 2009: 98).

A common world for Latour cannot be 'something we come to recognize, as though it had always been here (and we had not until now noticed it)' (2004: 455). It cannot pre-exist its articulation. Rather, a common world must be assembled through chains of human and nonhuman actors. Cosmopolitics is this work of assembling a shared world. A common world, he writes, 'if there is going to be one, is something we will have to build, tooth and nail, together';

Cosmopolitans may dream of the time when citizens of the world come to recognize that they all inhabit the same world ... cosmopolitics are up against a somewhat more daunting task: to see how this 'same world' can be slowly composed. (Latour 2004: 457)

In his 'Compositionist Manifesto', Latour (2010) outlines this alternative to theories of modernity, reflexive or otherwise. Here, Latour identifies a 'tenuous relation' with the Communist Manifesto. While rejecting the latter for its modernist commitments, he contends 'the two manifestos [do] have something in common: namely the search for the Common'



(2010: 14). However, in parting company with Marx, and indeed Beck, he adds the proviso that this is with the 'small but crucial difference that it has to be slowly composed instead of being taken for granted and imposed on all' (2010: 15). For Latour, this composition of the common is paramount as a question of ecology: 'How can a liveable and breathable "home" be built for ... [the] masses?' This, he writes, 'is the only question worth raising in this Compositionist Manifesto ... how will we find a sustainable home on Gaia?' (2010: 15).

In her contribution to the exhibition catalogue, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Stengers (2005) invokes Deleuze's idiot. The idiot is the one who knows how to slow things down to prevent the rush to consensus. The one

who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action. This is not because the presentation would be false or because emergencies are believed to be lies, but because "there is something more important". (Stenger 2005: 994)

The idiot, Stengers continues, 'demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know' (2005: 995). It is from this cosmopolitical perspective that she puts forward a twofold question:

How to design the political scene in a way that actively protects it from the fiction that 'humans of good will decide in the name of the general interest'? ... [And] how to design it in such a way that collective thinking has to proceed 'in the presence of' those who would otherwise be likely to be disqualified as having idiotically nothing to propose, hindering the emergent 'common account'? (Stengers 2005: 1002)

The unfolding crisis of anthropogenic climate change demands that decisions that once seemed to have nothing to do with the people of Kiribati, polar bears, glaciers, the gulf-stream, or the carbon cycle, must now be made in their presence, along with innumerable other human and non-human actors, if we are to work toward the composition of a common world – of a liveable, breathable 'home' on planet Earth. Perhaps, the cosmopolitical museum might come to put forward proposals by which 'we' think of our decisions 'in the presence of' those others once disqualified by the borders of nation, species, and animation, not on the assumption that we nevertheless share a common world, but that we enter into the hard work of its composition. To recall Hebdige's contention with which I opened: with regard to the climate crisis we find ourselves in networks of relations vastly more complex than the metaphor of 'the crossroad' would allow, here the 'vital role' of museums might lie in cosmopolitical experiments that – in facing the idiot's demand that 'we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know' – come to slow down decisions 'about which turn to take' and open up the chance of a common world.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The British Museum was not a signatory to ICOM's Declaration.
- <sup>2</sup> While the former has solicited heated debate, Jane notes that the latter remains, though 'groundbreaking ... largely unheralded' (2009: 85).
- <sup>3</sup> For examples, see the work of Habermas, Held and Honneth.
- <sup>4</sup> The pertinent findings of this study are reported in Cameron, *et al* (2011).
- <sup>5</sup> Material for the follow paragraphs are drawn from *HSGC Report Five* (2010).

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