

# Bathing in Glitter, Swimming in Neon Lights, Dipping in Cloudlike Ball Pits: Three Case Studies to Delve into the Era of Instagram Museums

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## 1. *Insta Museums “Sprouting Everywhere”: A Museological Problem? A Social-Media Trend?*

“There’s an epidemic in this town that seems to have reached crisis proportions in recent weeks.” With these words Neil Genzlinger describes the crowded artistic agenda of his New York during the 2011 summer, “infested” (Genzlinger 2011) by a swarm of pop-up exhibitions. And that summer in Manhattan showed the first makings of a phenomenon that has now attained undeniable prominence.

Exploding in 2016 via the Sprinkle Pool and vanilla-flavored tastings of the Museum of Ice Cream – shaped by the vision of Maryellis Bunn, the dreamer of a major temporary installation in honor of ice cream that spanned several rooms on Gansevoort Street in lower Manhattan, New York – the vogue of pop-up museums has invaded the cultural landscape. These pop-ups may be even better described as “Instagram Museums” – as Sofia Pistore (2018) suggested, spotting the theoretical and sociological value of Arielle Paredes’s remarks in one of the first attempts to fathom the extraordinary success of Bunn’s concept. It is a new genre of installations – writes Paredes (2017) – “Made for Instagram,” which seem to exist just for the visitors to “produce the perfect photo.”<sup>1</sup>

By highlighting the influence of Instagram in shaping the panorama of artistic practices, Paredes’s intuition undoubtedly detects a crucial point in the contemporary esthetic and museological debate. As noted by N.

<sup>1</sup> In this respect, as Pistore (2018, 57) underlines – it should be noted that the very first attempt to create a pop-up artistic venue as a “Creative Playhouse for the Instagram Set” was the *29Rooms* experience in New York, visitable between September 11 and 13, 2015 (Ryzik 2017).

Lavigne (2019), compelling changes in the art world can be seen since Instagram's earliest steps in the social-media universe: The year of its launch, 2010, is decidedly adjacent – not just at a chronological level – to the first reports of “restrictive policies on taking photos inside the galleries.” Lazaridou et al. (2017) devoted an extensive investigation to proving the socioeconomic value of Instagram in increasing the visibility and attractiveness of museums. Also, Ugurlu (2017) pointed out the underlying process of democratization of art behind the shareability of its contents in Insta posts, and Garner (2020) even goes so far as to argue how museums – and, generally speaking, all tourist locations – are metamorphosing to adapt to the Instagram esthetic.

This article proceeds precisely from the conviction that excessively anchoring the research on Instagram museums to their somehow *genetic* link to the *social media of instant photo sharing* appears reductive. The fact that they emerge from and draw their fuel from the dynamics of Instagram does not imply that their significance and philosophical interest can be merely resolved in this kinship. In other words, as revealed already by their very name, their contents notoriously align with what is generally inscribed under the broad and vague notion of *Instagrammability*. That said, instead of unquestioningly adopting the premise that they can be definable as *Instagrammable*, I suggest instead a shift in perspective that offers insights into the ways in which *Instagrammability* is defined, influenced, and shaped by Instagram museums' esthetics.

Indeed, I argue that these museums can offer new poignant angles not only on what it means to be *Instagrammable* but more importantly on the cultural atmosphere nurturing this, as well as other contemporary esthetic categories. My thesis gains reliability as soon as one adopts a semiotic gaze on current examples of installations classified as Instagram museums. Beginning from Bunn's worldwide phenomenon, most Instagram museums, although devoted to a wide variety of subjects, have in common a number of structural and iconological features that, strikingly, recur.

Nevertheless – as already noticeable from the sources cited at the beginning of this section – it is not easy to find in the critical literature support to discuss their characteristics, due to a likely combination of a certain reluctance of the scholarly community to engage with a mass-market phenomenon and the relative novelty of these museums. Aside from a far-flung series of mainstream media heralding the astonishing success of the Museum of Ice Cream – followed by the extensive coverage of the Color Factory, the Museum of Pizza, Candytopia, and the Dream Machine, among others similarly acclaimed – there is a dearth of scholarly contributions on the

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subject. As C. Stockham noted in his 2019 master's thesis: *There's a Museum for That? Defining New Pop-Up Experiential Exhibition Spaces*, this trend "has not received much scholarly attention" (Stockham 2019, 7) despite its relevance.

And even if – as Stockham's work itself attests – the seeds of an opening toward this research topic have been sown in the last four years, it keeps being addressed mostly within a limited museological framework. Mary Kwandras charted the origins, uses, and complications of pop-up Instagrammable exhibitions, but only in terms of whether they are a "worthy venture for museums to pursue" (Kwandras 2019, 4). Similar is the line of E. H. Anastasi (2020), who poses as her main question whether or not pop-up museums meet the definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).<sup>2</sup> Sofia Pistore's *La nascita degli "Instagram-Museums": analisi di un fenomeno contemporaneo e del cambiamento introdotto nella fruizione delle opere d'arte* (Pistore 2018) – despite presenting an attentive overview of twelve well-known Instagram museums and an initial categorization of their common traits – draws its conclusions before venturing into a detailed consideration of those commonalities on a level other than the one of artistic fruition and museum history. Similarly, apart from some sharp hints about the etiology of the success of the pop-up format, Stockham emphasizes that his essay aims to "be significant to the museum field" (Stockham 2019, 7) and defers his study of the impact of these new pop-up art spaces on other fields.

Standing out of the crowd, L. Kamolpluem and C. Isavorapant (2022) proposed, instead, an analysis of the figurative narratives of the Museum of Ice Cream. They show the fruitfulness of hybridizing and articulat-

<sup>2</sup> Although this question is not the target of this article, which plans instead to place the phenomenon of Instagram museums in a much broader framework than the museological one, it remains intriguing to mention Maryellis Bunn's answer when interviewed about her name choice for the *Museum of Ice Cream*. "Why create a museum?" Forbes inquired. Bunn replied: "When we were looking at names, *museum* was something *people understood*" (Adams 2017). Even if now, after two years of memorable success, she decided to retract her position by calling them *experiums* – and we cannot exclude that she did so just to overcome insistent quarrelling of the critics about this lexical question – her original insight retains its relevance. People somehow understood this first appellation. This fact shows how Instagram museums – as the critics highlight – still far from being wholeheartedly embraced by ICOM's definition, are contributing to disclosing a gap between the traditional and the contemporary social perception of museums, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity for rethinking. This opportunity calls for museology itself to embark on a multidisciplinary path, intersecting with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural studies.

ing the museological issues with observations from semiotics and visual studies. Following the path opened up by Kamolpluem and Isavorapant's thesis, my work intends, with the aid of three Italian examples – the Beautiful Gallery (Bologna), the Museum of Dreamers (Milan), and the Balloon Museum (Rome) – to start illustrating the characteristics shared by Instagram museums through the distinctive approach of “bricolage.” – drawn from Jean Marie Floch (2000, 1) and Lévi-Strauss (1966, 30, 50). Because bricoleurs make “new from the old by playing with the formal harmonies and disharmonies” (Floch 2000, 7), I benefit from an intense dialogue between philosophical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives to reconstruct the web of cultural roots of these exhibitions.

Without denying the importance of the museological problem of the Instagram pop-up spaces' conformity to museums' laws and definitions, I do not prioritize this question in my investigation. Instead I examine them within a broader framework, which attempts to unveil, through the help of philosophical-semiotic remarks, the esthetic and cultural instances they embody and convey. As stated at the beginning of this section, I depart from all the accounts that, excessively subordinating the nature and peculiarities of these museums to world of social networks, refrain from acknowledging their mutual influence. H. Mazouri wittily summarized the issue in 2018:

These pop-ups exist for a reason. They're the by-product of, and a testament to, a culture that demanded it. Instead of disregarding them, we'd be better to have our fun and make it mean something. The goal can't just be to go from room to room, chasing the perfect candid. (Mazouri 2018.)

With the aim of delving into the facets of this culture, I examine through a multidisciplinary lens a feature that my three Italian case studies share with their American predecessors: the pop-up/ephemeral essence.

A final crucial methodological note: This article intentionally ends by highlighting and leaving open a series of challenging – somewhat far-reaching – questions. The reason for doing so is to express that its aspiration is not to be conclusive. Rather, the desire is to bring to light new opportunities to deepen the debate about Instagram museums on an extra-museological plane before imparting artistic (and moral) endorsement or condemnation, and to unravel their dignity and privileged vantage point – at the crossroads of art and business, of education and entertainment, of mass-culture spaces and avant-garde exhibition venues – to understand contemporary society.

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### 2. *Pop(ping)-Up. Instagram Museums' Ephemerality in Its Relationship(s) with Space and Time*

Whether they claim to be devoted to daydreaming, inflatable objects, or boosting self-esteem, the Museum of Dreamers, the Balloon Museum, and the Beautiful Gallery share one key structural peculiarity: They have all embraced what the business world currently designates as the thriving pop-up format.<sup>3</sup>

Borrowing the onomatopoeic expression “pop-up” from the ballpark, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, economists have started to apply it to all those “shops and other – especially commercial – establishments opening quickly in a temporary location and intended to operate for a short period of time” (OED 2023). Either – as S. Haas and L. Schmidt (2016) argue – because of the acumen of Russel Miller, who, in 1999, noticed a huge interest in his clothing collection after announcing its short-term closure, or – as K. Best (2021, 203-218) suggests – because of the explosion of temporary restaurants in 2009, the pop-up model spread and gained a palpable respect in the modern business world.

Based on the “issue of novelty” (Warnaby 2018, 22), pop-up stores center on offering their clients extraordinary and unexpected experiences (Haas and Schmidt 2016, 3), satisfying what the marketing lexicon categorizes as the customers’ Need for Uniqueness (NFU).<sup>4</sup> Extraordinariness and bewilderment were also undeniably the desired effects of the designers Elena and Giulia Sella in setting up for three months – which then became six, thanks to the warm response of their 100,000 visitors – fifteen pinkish immersive installations on the theme of dreaming, introduced by none other than a human-sized inflatable unicorn, in a space of 2,000 square meters a few steps away from the Cathedral of Milan. I will also add the intents of the Bolognese artistic collective Beautiful which, in 2019, transformed an old car-repair shop full of “grease and dust” into a colorful “interactive fun-house” (Santori 2019). Further, the Lux Eventi team

<sup>3</sup> If the Milanese Museum of Dreamers – which lasted from September 20, 2022, to March 27, 2023 – and the Roman Balloon Museum – inaugurating December 7, 2021 and closing on March 5, 2022 – can be properly described as pop-up events, the case of the Beautiful Gallery requires further explanation. The Beautiful Gallery opened in Via Montebello (Bologna) in 2019 and has since changed location four times until it landed in Via Malaguti (Bologna) in 2023. Even though, it has never left its city of origin, unlike the Museum of Dreamers and the Balloon Museum, I will consider it a pop-up due to the peculiarity that it has not remained in the same venue for more than a year.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001, 50-66.

created the first temporary museum of inflatable art – awarded Best 2022 Proprietary Format by BEA World – by asking seven artists to populate an old industrial building in Viale Angelico (Rome) with gigantic, flamboyant balloons.

This terminological and conceptual consonance Instagram/pop-up Museums hold with commercial pop-ups is not only one of the main focuses of most of the – limited – literature about them, but also a major reason they receive criticism. Besides their ephemeral nature, which boldly undermines the 2022 ICOM definition that a museum is a “permanent institution,”<sup>5</sup> their connection to the economic world is widely perceived as a pitfall for the artistic field.

There are so many clichés about museums as “money machines” and their repositories as mines to be monetized immediately by putting them up for sale: cultural heritage as the country’s “oil.” (...) Instead, museums have nothing to do with the market economy. (Fontanarossa 2022.)

The cutting words that R. Fontanarossa writes in the pages of her recently published book *Collezionisti e Musei* leave little room to engage with the – evidently market- and marketing-friendly – trend of pop-up museums and its Italian incarnations both from a museological as well as a cultural perspective.

But dismissal of them as a mass phenomenon may not be as plain as it seems. The correlation between the cultural-artistic realm and ephemerality – Kwandras emphasizes – has much deeper roots than the last decade. “Old masters exhibitions” (2016, 27) – whose harbingers arrived in the Florentine Academy of Design throughout the seventeenth century – had their formal outset in Pall Mall in 1815, where an exclusive temporary show celebrated the fame of the English painter Joshua Reynolds. And in the vibrant musical panorama of the 1950s, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg involved the students of the Black Mountain College in the first happening in history, giving a substantial contribution

<sup>5</sup> ICOM’s new 2022 “Museum Definition” states:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing. (ICOM 2022.)

in initiating one of the most influential, attractive – and volatile – expressive languages of modernity: performance art.

So art history itself complicates the picture. Being intrinsically two-sided, the Sella sisters' Beautiful collective and the Lux experiments show at the same time facets reminiscent of commercial pop-ups and ephemeral artistic events. Only by sketching the questions about their pop-up character in this two-sided framework can one grasp their scope on a philosophical and sociological level. Their hybrid state between art and business permits them not merely to push museology toward interrogating its axioms – especially those about the permanence and unprofitability of museums – but above all to isolate the core aspects and issues that mark the pop-up/ephemeral event format, alongside the aspects typical of its fields of application. A closer look at the Museum of Dreamers, the Beautiful Gallery, and the Balloon Museum reveals that their pop-up essence is more relevant than their commercial and artistic value because it has to do with and significantly influences the way of conceiving the human relationship with space and time.

In her analysis of pop-up stores, sociologist Anja Overdiek (2017) has acutely observed the harmonious correlations they maintain with the Lefebvrian notion of “differential spaces” (Lefebvre 1991, 352-400). According to Overdiek, pop-ups – by presenting themselves as interstices cracking the static homogeneity of the city and encouraging the public to interactivity and co-creation – open up opportunity for a reappropriation of the urban space by the urban community. Pop-up spacing – she adds, following Harris (2015) – “reevaluates (vacant) public and corporate areas,” often re-enlivening residual zones “left out of space and time” (Overdiek 2017, 123).<sup>6</sup>

Overdiek's words undoubtedly resonate with Lux's choice to install their inflatable exhibition in the PratiBus District, an industrial venue created from the conversion of an old depot of a Roman transportation company—as well as with the location of the Beautiful Gallery in 2019, which refurbished a gray abandoned auto shop with colorful wallpapers and plastic balls. Even the downtown setting of the Museum of Dreamers and the location of the Beautiful Gallery in 2022, in collaboration with the historic Palazzo Isolani, just a few meters from the Basilica of Santo Stefano, can be read through Lefebvre's categories. Their presence may

<sup>6</sup> About this connection between marginal and abandoned areas of the cities and differential spaces, see also Lehtovuori 2010.

represent an opportunity of rekindling the “textures” (Lefebvre 1991, 73) of the interactions with two well-known Italian tourist sites, whose sacralized fame threatens to congeal their role into static forms, jeopardizing – as Lefebvre would say<sup>7</sup> – their always socially rewritable and dynamic “horizon of meaning” (225).

However, by drawing attention to other common structural features of my three case studies, another striking theoretical assonance emerges, namely, with the conceptual vocabulary of Augé. In describing “non-places” – those spaces supermodernity built for specific purposes such as “transportation, transit, commerce, leisure,” devoid of “relational, historical” qualities and “concerns with identities” (Augé 1959, 77) – Marc Augé is careful to add some further clarifications. The only “identity” they convey is the “temporary” (101) collective identification of those who cross them, fading the instant one passes their exits. Non-places support no solid individuality or relationship, but – according to the French anthropologist – just “solitude, and similitude” (103), fostering the “temptation to narcissism” through the equally trivial and seductive law: “Do as others to be yourself” (106). There is no room for references to a historical past, nor for the possibility of tracing a new history. Non-places’ interchange with time relies solely on the fact that measured and codified temporal units scan all the transits into them.

If Lefebvrian theories on the *production of space* allow and suggest a viable interpretation of the cultural role of pop-up museums, these remarks by Augé are equally trenchant and offer an alternative insight. Taking again

<sup>7</sup> It is not the intention here to ignore the intricate roots of the Lefebvrian notion of “differential space” or to oversimplify the conceptual density that characterizes it. Indeed, one of the most problematic aspects of applying Lefebvre’s notion to Instagram museums is undoubtedly the distinct political connotation that the creation and use of differential spaces carries in some passages of *The Production of Space*. Still, what does leave a door for identifying interesting consonances is an inescapable margin of vagueness around the notion of differential space, which, – to quote Harvey – always remains “frustratingly undefined” (Harvey 2000, 183) due to its configuration as an “endlessly open possibility.” Added to this is the complex triadic dynamic among thought, and perceived and lived space, which expands the possibilities to produce differential spaces, because “something different” can arise not only at the theoretical/architectural level, but “from what people perceive, feel, do, realize and come to articulate” (Harvey 2012, xvii) when they live a space concretely. Further, Instagram Museums, as places of leisure and spaces oriented toward playful experiences form another interesting, unresolved knot in Lefebvrian thought: that of the “contradictory category” (Leary-Owhin 2016, 267) of ludic space, which can be understood simultaneously as the space of victory of neocapitalist commodification or as a “vast counter-space that escapes the control of the established order” (Leary-Owhin 2016, 267-268).



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into account the Milanese pop-up *hommage* to the oneiric world, not all of its visitors felt empowered to express and fulfill their dreams, as the Sella sisters – at least publicly – hoped. With wording surprisingly like that of Augé, the journalist Simone Mosca (2022) summed up his experience at the Museum of Dreamers as a bundle of “pics in solitude,” spiced up with a flood of “pink and socks.” Socks were the only “communitarian trait” of the group of dreamers bathing in the fuchsia-colored plastic ball pit. Otherwise, everyone was similarly self-referentially obsessed with ‘Insta-capturing’ themselves, to the point of “fighting” (Mosca 2022) to secure the best spots.

If you scroll through the same landing page on the Beautiful Gallery Web site, you can sense a whiff of what Augé would call homologizing narcissism. In presenting 2023 exhibition, *Admission to be yourself*, it intones: “focus on yourself, on who you are deep inside, regardless of the judgment of others” to counter the “mass-bombardment of flashy images shared by the people, making you feel as you do not have sufficient satisfaction.”<sup>8</sup> This appears, before trying, a few lines later, to entice egos and social media selves by offering the option to book private photo shoots inside the museum.

As for the standardized and pre-coded relationship of non-places to time, it is staggering how closely Augé’s musings accord with the Beautiful Gallery’s alarm system, which imposed a cadence on tours of five minutes per room. While the Sella sisters and Lux Eventi may not have embraced such a metronymic attitude as their Bolognese colleagues, they still have formulated the visit with a tight rhythm that also helps manage the intense flows of people, who would otherwise bottle up in long queues to access and be captured with their favorite installations. This applies to the purple neon moon in the Museum of Dreamers, where waiting lines of fifteen minutes can form, or to the Hypercosmo beloved ball pit in the Balloon Museum, into which the crowds of *swimmers* are allowed to delve for a maximum of five minutes.<sup>9</sup>

An explicit focus on the temporal dimension of these museums raises another stimulating pair of hermeneutic options. There is a widespread agreement among critics of Instagram Museums in assessing the adoption

<sup>8</sup> Beautiful Gallery Bologna, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Augé would probably criticize the choice of the Museum of Dreamers and the Beautiful Gallery to occupy some historical areas of the city and read it as an example of the progressive estheticization of the urban environment that contributes to the production of *non-lieux* (Augé 1959, 73).

of the short-duration format typical of commercial pop-ups as an appropriate response to the impact of social media and the resulting – quoting Anastasi – “increase of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)” (Anastasi 2020, 45). FOMO – the pervasive apprehension that others might have worthwhile experiences while one is missing them and, consequently, the desire to keep up with what other people are doing<sup>10</sup> – can, even apart from being reinforced by social media platforms, undoubtedly provide a compelling cultural motivation to explain the fortunes of pop-up museums, and, more generally, the pop-up concept *per se*.

Nevertheless, a different exegetical path seems just as viable. If one closely examines the abovementioned artistic roots of the ephemeral event format, it emerges that the Fluxus collective – and, along with it, many other representatives from the field of happenings and performance art – conceived ephemerality as a way of conveying a perspective on time other than the “chronological” one. To quote the reflections of the visual artist Paul Chan – whose words enter into a dialogue with some vital concepts of the history of ideas, such as the Heideggerian *Ereignis* and, of course, *kairos* – if *chronos* translates a linear and homogeneous way of outlining the flow of time, a “kairological” (Chan 2014) approach centers instead on seizing the unpredictable and ephemeral unicity of events. Through this lens, the impermanent nature of museums such as the Museum of Dreamers, the Beautiful Gallery, and the Balloon Museum starts looking less like a commercial gimmick playing on a mass phobia of modernity and more like the expression of a qualitative way of living time, by adopting an ethic of agency and responsibility that encourages the power to act and take advantage of – as the ancient Greeks and Chan would say – “opportune occasions” (Chan 2014).

As anticipated, the display of this plethora of potential readings does not aim to close the curtain on the debate about Instagram/Pop-up museums, but, on the contrary, to re-open – and, in most cases, to inaugurate – a discussion on a series of too often overlooked issues about the social and cultural motives for their creation.

Driven by this mission, the present article can only end with a summary of the unresolved questions it contributed to suggesting:

- Are Instagram museums, in Lefebvorean terms, examples of “differential spaces,” with the potential of re-animating the relationship between cities

<sup>10</sup> See Akbari et al. 2021, 879-900.

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and their urban communities by pulling citizens out of their “spatial routine” (Overdiek 2017, 124)?

- Or are they instead another perfect embodiment of the *non-lieux* Augé identified as a hallmark of supermodern society?
- Is their temporality a cunning marketing response to today’s rampant FOMO?
- Or, conversely, do Instagram museums advance the possibility of dwelling in a time full of occasions to catch and of nonstandardized, identical units?

### 3. *Final Remarks and Future Work*

After reviewing the little available literature about Instagram / pop-up museums and highlighting its focus predominantly on museological hypotheses biased by social-media studies, I distanced myself from the critique, by trying to showcase the philosophical interest of contextualizing this contemporary trend in a broader cultural framework. Using a theoretical approach that benefits from the interaction with other disciplines, I have begun to investigate the recurring features of Instagram museums, from the pop-up nature shared by three Italian case studies: the Museum of Dreamers, the Beautiful Gallery and the Balloon Museum. I have provided a set of viable answers to explain the cultural instances behind their ephemerality, including its potential links to Lefebvrian reflections about space and Marc Augé’s anthropological categories.

This article is intended only as a cornerstone to promote extensive dialogue about Instagram museums’ peculiarities. Among other pivotal features that should be explored in future work is the general tendency of these museums to propose whimsical and childlike scenarios as well as their particular attention to synesthetic installations and their desire to embody the paradigm of immersivity in all the experiences they provide, beginning with their unmissable flamboyant plastic ball pits.

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