

# Loves me, loves me not: The Museum of Broken Relationships scene analysis

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHY Parinaz Adib of works by unknown graffiti artists

# Loves me, loves me not

## The Museum of Broken Relationships scene analysis

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The Balkan region is known for its historical climate of turbulent social relations; thus, public spaces that consecrate shared experiences of grief and loss come as no surprise. One such space, however, has experienced astonishing growth in its fame and popularity, not just as a renowned cultural landmark, but as a significant Croatian cultural export. The Museum of Broken Relationships is filled with unremarkable everyday objects donated by lovers who associate them with their past relationships. The value of these objects is not necessarily utilitarian, or aesthetic, but symbolic: they represent the emotions of remorse and pain elicited by breakups. This paper is an account of the objects, stories, and narratives found in the Museum of Broken Relationships. It considers the Museum a lens through which people can scrutinize the meaning of love in their everyday lives and consequently re-shape their identities. It looks into the Museum's transformative potency as a spiritual and sacred space that offers hope in times of despair, fosters disorientation and chaos, and offers visitors an opportunity to confirm or reject their previous perspectives on love.

**KEY WORDS** museums, love, material culture

I have always wondered whether caterpillars know they are going to become butterflies, or whether they just lie in their cocoons thinking, “What on Earth am I doing?” What a fate, to wake up one day in the body of an utterly different insect, with inherently divergent instincts, drives, needs, pleasures, and pains. As surreal and magnificent as it sounds, metamorphosis can also be an absurd, terrifying, and disturbing process. It is, perhaps, its agonizing nature that makes it an experience that an organism would not want to be aware of as it unfolds. Even in the human world, any change, big or small, positive or negative, afflicts the organism with distressing tension and dread.

There is, perhaps, no better emblem of such critical and pivotal points in the lives of individuals than breakups of love relationships which often leave past lovers with shattered identities. In fact, breaking up is a rather misleading term. More often than not, the bonds between former partners remain strong and persist long after the relationship has come to an end; and, what is more, it takes time and effort for one to recover and solidify one's own individual self. My intuitive assumption was that coping with such an intimate crisis would be a rather personal and private act, exposed exclusively to the circle of closest



**Inside the Museum of Broken Relationships.**

PHOTO COURTESY: MUSEUM OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

family members, friends, and, at times, professional counsellors. One institution, however, led me to reconsider my initial postulation. It is the Museum of Broken Relationships, a space consecrated to the shared experience of grief and despair in relation to lost love and an authentic model of public space made “liminal” (Turner 1969:95). It is the space where bonds with former partners and relationships are aimed to be loosened, and even broken, through former lovers discarding, donating, and exhibiting objects which they associate with their ended relationships. Originating in a small European country, Croatia, the Museum of Broken Relationships is now winning hearts and minds of people from across the world.

Indeed, the things that change with breakups are many, as one is not merely leaving their partner, but the part of their life that was defined by that relationship. A breakup period calls for many new considerations and decisions; it is a period of disruption of what our lives used to be, but also a period when personal growth and the Self become a priority. I would suggest that it is precisely such life crises which serve as stepping stones to new possibilities and identities. As the Chinese word for crisis suggests, chaos gives rise to opportunity. Contrary to the traditional conception of museum exhibitions as thoroughly, even meticulously planned, curated, and displayed, the Museum of Broken Relationships, allows the unstructured voluntary donations of random everyday objects, as well as the accompanying narratives written by the owners of the objects to be displayed. As such, the exhibited objects and narratives become the means of recuperating the broken hearts. This institutionalization of coping and muddling through breakups of intimate relationships, as well as the subjectivities formed in such a way, will be the central focus of this paper.

The existence of such institutions and establishments is, in fact, not new. For example, in the well-known art installation *My Bed*, Tracey Emin showcases her bed in the state in which she claims it had been during her breakup. The bed is covered in bodily secretions, bloody stains from self-injurious acts, as well as everyday objects, such as empty food boxes, slippers and tissues (Galenson 2008:25). In that way, Emin publicly displays the intimate emotional states related to her love's life and death, and invites her audience to reflect on their own experiences of love. What is new, however, is the unprecedented popularity of conducting such a candidly personal and private experience as coping with love loss in public, which is exemplified by the astonishing scope of the aforementioned Museum's growth and spread all around the globe. The Museum of Broken Relationships is well on its way to reach the goal of exhibiting in every country in the world within a seven year period. I would suggest that the exponentially growing demand for publicizing personal love narratives is indicative not just of personal crossroads, but of the large-scale collective crisis concerning the issue of love and relationships in the changing contemporary world, as well as of the shared effort to establish modern meanings of this human condition.

The Museum's collection is straightforward as it consists of unremarkable everyday objects donated to the Museum by former lovers for whom they are meaningful because of their association with past relationships. Thus, the Museum comes to existence only through such contingent, unstructured, unsystematic, offhand personal donations. Many curators across the world disapprove of such acquisition and display of the exhibits by naming it "crowd-sourcing," on account of its perceived contempt for carefully conceptualized and displayed exhibition. What these curators fail to recognize, however, is that it is not the objects themselves, but people's stories and experiences behind them, which is the essential idea behind the exhibition. The Museum of Broken Relationships blurs the boundary between production and reception, creating and viewing. Past lovers are not just the exhibitors; they are also the exhibits, as well as the viewers, thus claiming a threefold authority over the Museum space. Indeed, as Gramsci suggested, people are "organic intellectuals" with a capacity to modify a current conception of the world (1992:199–203). By assuming absolute control over the Museum's content, past lovers generate an extra-structural space that is by the people, for the people, and about the people.

The objects displayed are various, but also ordinary and commonplace. At first, it might seem that there is nothing remarkable about nasal spray or a plush toy; however, it is not the objects' utilitarian or aesthetic value that makes them significant, but their history and personal associations. Undeterred by their unexceptional nature, our dearest treasures have become powerful signifiers of personally meaningful and esteemed associations, memories, and recollections. As such, material culture becomes a crucial component of human relations (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006:4). Objects have the power to provoke emotions and thoughts, and this "evocative" quality makes them inseparable from our life events, or, as Turkle states, "We think with the objects we love; we love objects we think with" (2007:16). The evocative nature of objects is captured in Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage" which explains the phenomenon of people acquiring existing objects from various aspects of social life, and ascribing them new meanings (1966:19). Indeed, objects become an integral part of our romantic relationships. Rings

exchanged during the wedding ceremony, shared wardrobe and bed sheets, even the favourite foods of a past lover become the embodiment and expression of the abstract, yet real emotions of love and attachment.

For these reasons, once the relationship is over, these objects might become poisonous reminder of loss that must be purged, as keeping the object in one's possession might feel as holding onto the perished past. For other people, however, these objects might be held as a dear memory of cherished past and people. Indeed, the Museum's space is filled with both humour and tragedy. An example of a humorous object is the candy G-string given to the owner by "a guy who was as cheap and shabby as his presents" (Vištica and Grubišić 2010). A tragic one is the letter written by a Bosnian refugee to a girl whom he met on the transportation convoys in 1992. As he puts it, "The letter was never delivered, but she has never been forgotten" (Vištica and Grubišić 2010). Some objects are explicitly tied to past relationships, as the "flawless engagement ring given by the flawed fiancé" (Vištica and Grubišić 2010); while the meaning of other objects is rather symbolic, as the magnifying glass that represents how "small I felt around him" (Vištica and Grubišić 2010). Among all the trivial and everyday things, one can also find some bizarre objects, such as a bottle filled with tears cried out after a breakup.

Such a variety of objects and their accompanying narratives stands for a wide range of different emotions people go through during breakups, as well as other relationship experiences. This phenomenon is best seen through a cross-cultural perspective. The Museum of Broken Relationships has travelled to many countries; however, the collection in each locale consists of the items donated by the local population. Narratives that accompany objects are fairly similar across the world, as they are commonly tied to the themes of disappointment, pain, regret and disillusion. However, many of the objects and narratives are context specific. For instance, whereas tales in Bosnia were largely related to the war in the 1990's, one in five exhibited Philippine love stories ended when one of the partners left to work abroad. By the same token, while a single cell-phone is the only electronic object stored in a Zagreb museum, items from Singapore were mostly computerized items. Such context-specific quality of the Museum of Broken Relationships affirms Eriksen's "glocalization" hypothesis which suggest that globalizing processes induce the vitalization of local cultural expressions (2007:58).

Equally important is the space of the Museum which constitutes a configurative framework for displayed exhibits. Placing the exhibition within the space of a museum conveys a significant meaning in itself, by virtue of museums being not just physical, but also conceptual spaces. As McLuhan suggested, "the medium is the message" (1964:7), as it both shapes our perception of the message, and is itself a message. The museum spaces influence the way the exhibition is organized and perceived, what is more, they describe and portray people who authored it (Edwards, Gosden, and Philipps 2006:254). Following that logic, the way objects are displayed in the Museum of Broken Relationships reflects the collective memories and beliefs about love held by the donators and visitors. The value ascribed to the objects is indicated through the display of items as focal points in the space of the Museum. To illustrate, objects are placed on contrasting, colourless surfaces and illuminated; and, as Putnam suggests, any item appears special when placed in a museum's vitrine or a wall (2009:37). Furthermore, exhibits are organized in aisles

**2. Museum of Broken Relationships**  
Zagreb, Croatia  
2010  
The Museum of Broken Relationships is a museum in Zagreb, Croatia, which displays objects that were left behind by people in broken relationships. The museum is a collection of objects that were left behind by people in broken relationships. The museum is a collection of objects that were left behind by people in broken relationships.



**The mad dwarf.**

PHOTO COURTESY: MUSEUM OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

that represent different emotions. The Aisle of Rage and Fury, for example, holds objects like the Mad Dwarf sculpture that was thrown by an angry wife onto the windshield of her husband's new car on the day of their divorce. Perhaps the most tragic part of the Museum is the Resonance of Grief room with a single object that belonged to a young girl who ended her life on the night of her break-up. The space of the Museum itself is intimate and comfortable, and, as such, it is designed to elicit specific kinds of emotions in visitors in relation to the exhibited objects. Most notably, the physical barrier between the visitor and the untouchable objects might be central to creating distance and disconnection between people and the objects that signify love loss and disappointment. In this way, hope in future relationships is preserved. In addition to glass vitrines and "do not touch" warnings also found in other museums, the Museum of Broken Relationships intensifies the detachment between viewers and exhibits people that "when you hear this noise, it is time to move on" (Vištica and Grubišić 2010) chimes that periodically remind people to move on.

Another important feature of museums is in the purpose of storing and preserving the remains of the past. A prevalent belief is that love is worthwhile only if it endures, otherwise, as its mere semantics suggests, it is 'broken.' In the space of the Museum, however, even the unsuccessful love is able to live on in the objects that symbolize it. Past relationships are something we need to let go of, something that can no longer exist within us; thus, discarding the symbols of the broken relationships is a form of release and liberation. However, allowing past relationships to live apart from us is therapeutic and cathartic, as



**Fragments of a love letter.**

PHOTO COURTESY: MUSEUM OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

people are able to preserve the bits and parts of their shattered identities represented by those objects, and protect their personas. The love letter written on the fragmented glass is, perhaps, the best testimony to this claim. As her relationship crumbled, the author of the love letter safeguarded her reality from crumbling along by shattering the words of love inscribed onto the mirror instead. Fragments of the love letter, the mirror, and the author's lost love now remain removed and distant in the Museum, so her persona could continue to flourish.

Furthermore, just as visitors are central to the success of the exhibition, they are also crucial for the success of the Museum as a liminal space. According to Habermas (1989), the public is constituted as relations among strangers by means of having access to the same cultural texts. It is, however, perplexing to think that these mundane everyday objects can resonate so highly with complete strangers. Warner (2002) provides us with the valuable idea of reflexivity which explains how complete strangers come to understand and make sense of each other through the process of focusing their attention on the same, continuously circulated cultural texts which establish the basis for their interaction. The public, for Warner, is the "ongoing space of encounter" (2002:62), characterized by its tangible and concrete nature conducted through regular daily performativity. Along with the definition of public, Warner has introduced notion of "counterpublics" (2002:86), the self-organized subordinate publics who act as agents that openly challenge the structure. Both of these publics, I would argue, operate in the space of the Museum of Broken Relationships, either confirming and reproducing, or challenging and transforming dominant values attached to the ideas of love and relationships.

A big part of the breakup aftermath is the search for a feeling that one is not alone, yet that there are others with whom one shares the same emotional agony. The Museum of Broken Relationships is the space which institutionalizes the compassionate relationships between the once secure and loved, and the now rejected, broken-hearted souls. While gazing at and self-identifying with the exhibits and their narratives, visitors form mental images of the objects' former owners, thus, founding a basis of their ensuing connectedness. As Grotowski suggests, "artists' goals are not to teach others but to learn with them about their existence" (1975:212). This self-analysis and self-search of all the Museum's partakers "reliminalizes" a modern human beings by placing them within existential *comunitas* that challenge the normative (Turner 1982:118). Indeed, audiences complete the artwork by ascribing it particular meaning.

Transformation of the normative becomes possible as the Museum's partakers do not merely reproduce the social memory. On the contrary, imagined shared identities, collective memories and beliefs about love, as represented by the exhibits, serve as a foundation upon which exhibitors and visitors may challenge the very nature of love as a fundamental human condition. Indeed, the ideal love is a rather elusive and delusional concept, and, as such, beyond anyone's reach. However, to build upon Wornow's (2007) idea, each subsequent failure to obtain the ideal love furthers the former lovers' drive to attain it. As Turner (1969) suggests, people rise above and surmount the shared disoriented states, in this instance the breakup aftermath, and work together to construct new meanings. Thus, the performative reiterations, such as acquiring, preserving, exhibiting and viewing the objects from our past relationships, continue to modify the ways love is understood, experienced, and generated in people's everyday lives. The Museum of Broken Relationships is, thus, a "frame" (Goffman 1974:1) within which symbols of love are "scrutinized, assessed, remodelled, and rearranged" (Turner 1969:35). Thereafter, the symbols of love, with their renewed character, are applied to the world outside the frame. Under these circumstances, novel ideas challenge the continuation of preliminary structures and beliefs in people's everyday lives (Turner 1969:33).

There are, indeed, many spaces in which dominant structures are challenged. However, not all those spaces have such a powerful transformative potency as the Museum of Broken Relationships. By minimizing the influence of the Museum's curator, and permitting the display of normally taboo objects and narratives, the Museum's space allows for the experimentation with spontaneous, undirected, and unrestricted ideas. For instance, the "ex-axe" (Vištica and Grubišić 2010) owner who chopped her partner's furniture after their breakup would likely be penalized by the judicial system, yet she is celebrated within the Museum's space as a source of satire and humiliation of those who hurt us. Such suspension of established social structures and the unconstrained expression are crucial for the empowerment of subjects who are free to employ their agency (Turner 1969:94).

People deconstruct their personas in relation to the exhibits, and enter the disorganized state of disintegrated identities, with the ultimate looked-for aspiration of reviving and recovering their coherent self. They acquire the modern identity which is a reflection of the current state of social and cultural life, thus it either reinforces or rejects dominant social structures. What is more, even the liminal phase itself is provoked by the current social conditions. As Geertz suggests, performances are texts through which

communities “tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1973:448), thus reflecting on their everyday norms in the microspace. Exhibits and the accompanying narratives are the expression of many social anxieties and a modern emotional need for renewal of a sense of selfhood, as well as the relationships we have with others. For instance, the fear of being cheated on and betrayed is portrayed through a teddy bear holding a heart that says “I Love You,” and the owners furious outcry “Lies! Damn Lies!” (Vištica and Grubišić 2010) A pair of oversized plastic breasts speaks to the modern unrealistic standards of beauty, or as their owner reflected, “Maybe the relationship would have lasted longer if I had put these on” (Vištica and Grubišić 2010).

Likewise, Lears suggests a number of modern changes that are detrimental to human identities. Urbanization and industrial development brought the anonymity of cities and the increasing distancing between people which can be corrosive of both people’s subjectivities and interactions. Technological development brought convenience and comfort that eased people’s lives, but are too insubstantial to make people happy. The market economy alienated people from creative production processes, and estranged them from their coworkers. Secularization of religion caused the loss of familiar framework of meaning and morals, thus placing one in the state of “anomie” or “normlessness.” The resultant human beings are fragmented between desires and expectations; they experience inner emptiness and paralyzing depression, blurred morals and no autonomous selfhood (Lears 1983:83–85). It is under these pressing conditions that people are transforming the meanings of being in love and in a relationship, thus showing us the urgency and integral importance of this quest for creating new meanings.

I would suggest that the Museum of Broken Relationships’ transformative potency relates directly to this core human attribute of a social being. Indeed, compassion is the emotion which is continuously overlooked and dismissed in today’s society, yet it constitutes the very heart of the Museum’s exhibition. The evidence for such ingrained and intuitive fellow feelings among humans comes from the field of social neuroscience which has recently discovered so-called “mirror neurons” that allow us to automatically empathize by activating the exact same brain areas that are active in the person with whom we interact (Lukianoff 2012:1). Thus, these neurons are active embodied reflections of the movements, sensations, and emotions of someone with whom we are interacting. They are a proof of us being programmed to feel for one another. But why don’t we? How did it become so that people are able to pass next to the sick, fainted man without even paying attention? Lears suggests that we have become too self-absorbed and preoccupied with ourselves to notice others (Lears 1983:82). On the contrary, the Museum of Broken Relationships is a space where people become deeply immersed in and absorbed by other people’s stories. People actively question and challenge the decadence of modern human relationships, and seek to find that true substance of humanity—rich and meaningful affectionate relationships with others. This is not just a personal quest, it is a collectively authored reflection on reality, as well as a co-production of new social norms that extend beyond the Museum’s space and impact the ways people relate to each other.

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