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# Museological Review: What is a museum today?

A Peer-Reviewed Journal Edited by the PhD  
Students of the School of Museum Studies

# Museological Review Issue 24: What is a museum today?

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# Editorial - Issue 24: What is a museum today?

Welcome to issue 24 of the Museological Review. This year's theme is 'what is a museum today?', which was originally inspired by the debate around how ICOM (International Council of Museums) define what a museum is in contemporary society. This definition was discussed during their annual conference in Kyoto, Japan, last September. Within the journal you will find academic articles, exhibition and book reviews and visual submissions which broadly respond to this idea, specifically considering the role that museums play in society through exhibitions, programming and projects. Dispersed in-between these submissions you will also find over 40 reflections of what a museum is today, contributed from professionals invested in this field worldwide. These offer a diverse and exciting look into how museums are understood today, and where their future might lead.

Issue 24 marks the first time where we have been collaborating and developing the journal through a global pandemic. In the current situation with COVID-19 we would like to thank everyone involved in issue 24 for supporting us and working so efficiently under the circumstances. We feel it has brought us closer together through a difficult time apart, and we hope that the ideas, projects and insights presented in issue 24 provide some inspiration for the future, and how we can look at what a museum is today through new lenses. We feel that the front cover image by **Cesare Cuzzola** reflects this period of time perfectly, and how much the small acts of kindness have been a massive support to us all.

Following previous editions, issue 24 engages with a range of platforms, alongside the new addition of shorter accounts which speak directly to the theme of this issue. We hope these will give a depth and range of perspectives. Contributions have been arranged according to five sub-themes: rethinking approaches to display, contemporary conflict, approaches to

health and wellbeing, community projects and storytelling, and migration reflected in exhibition narratives. We would also like to extend our thanks to **Dr Yunci Cai** for sharing her insightful reflections on the newly proposed ICOM definition for museums as an introduction to our call for shorter accounts and reflections.

The first section of this issue, rethinking approaches to display, begins with **Nanna Balslev Strøjer's** discussion of museums' as enablers and inhibitors for democratic action, using MoMA's recent launch of the 'New MoMA' (2019) and the art exhibition 'There is No' at Nordnorsk Museum (2017) as examples which encourage openness in new models of display. Similarly, **Ava Salzer** reviews the processes involved in creating new ways of display through her reflection on Diana E Marsh's 'Extinct Monsters to Deep Time: Conflict, Compromise, and the Making of Smithsonian's Fossil Halls'. Salzer gives an insight into how Marsh unravels the design process throughout the publication. This leads on to **Blaire Moskowitz's** exhibition review which explores the new approach to storytelling at the 'New MoMA' (2019), re-emphasising Strøjer's earlier consideration of this to enact democratic engagement, but Moskowitz also reflects on how the museum's architecture and history is integrated into the new approach.

The exploration into how display is being re-invented leads into section two where submissions consider how contemporary conflict can be represented within museums and art galleries, and what this means in regard to what a museum is today. This section begins with a conversation between **Farina Asche, Daniela Döring** and **Nora Sternfeld** to discuss the potentials of a democratic museum, and how this might engage with issues and changes in contemporary society. This discussion draws on Sternfeld's publication 'The radical

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Democratic Museum (2018) which opens up the museum as a political space. Following this **Lanzhou Luo** reflects on similar questions of democracy represented in museums, but from a Chinese perspective to consider how socialist values might integrate with museum practices and collections. **Minju Oh** continues to cast a lens on how contemporary conflict is engaged with through museum practices by critiquing the newly opened exhibition in the Independence Hall of Korea, and how it deals with emotions when it comes to tackling difficult histories. Oh analyses how these historical dialogues might encourage diverse responses, and how museums can support and reflect these. Lastly in section two is a visual submission by artist, **Anupam Roy**, which explores ideas of temporality and contemporarily in how history is presented and understood. We feel the submissions in this section really reflect the potential museums have to encourage debate around contemporary conflict and understandings through how they utilise their place and meaning with society.

Section three continues to look at re-thinking museum practice, but through projects which focus of health and wellbeing, which in the current climate is pivotal to us as a society. Firstly, we visit **Kristy Van Hoven's** article which considers how museum engagement can support the mental health of their communities. She particularly looks into how programmes and exhibitions are designed and curated to provide outlets which encourage positive health outcomes. This leads onto **Yanrong Jiang's** review of two publications which investigate museum's as spaces for encouraging children's wellbeing. By combining both pieces of literature Jiang explores what these spaces mean and how they are understood currently. These values are also represented in **Jessica Starns'** visual submission which documents an exhibition she held which explored how neurodiversity might be considered when designing exhibitions, and how she experimented with different models for accessibility.

With health and wellbeing in mind, we have to draw links to our communities and how museums tell the stories they hold, with people at the heart of this, whether we are together or apart. Thus, section four begins with **Valentina**

**Vavassori's** exploration of the interplay between digital and physical narratives in our lives today, and how this can be integrated into museum practice to build communities inside the museum and through digital platforms. This reflection of what community means in how museums are understood is further explored by **Damian Etherington** in his account of how Hastings Museum and Art Gallery has adopted a community-led approach to pursue a more sustainable future. This first-hand critique supports how different roles within a museum play a part in how they communicate with audiences. In **Mari Østhaug Møystad's** article storytelling is reviewed as a way of displaying lived experiences in an inclusive and collaborative way, this then leads to **Cesare Cuzzola's** visual submission which portrays 'HumanKind', a community project at Calke Abbey which is a National Trust site in Derbyshire, UK. This piece reflects how projects can encourage and inspire us to make connections and support each other, even in the smallest ways. Through drawing connections in this section through the scale of projects within cultural institutions we can see the importance of these engagements for communities, giving them the freedom to decide how they want to be involved.

The final section of issue 24 returns to how museums can be part of the conversations happening in society, similarly to how they can support debates around conflict, this section draws on submissions which look further into migration. The first article by **Susanne Boersma** critiques how museum display's represent migration, and who's voice they are presenting, and in turn how they might approach this as a conversation. Boersma draws specifically on three case studies which discuss the refugee protection crisis in Berlin, and how these might inspire contemporary practice to facilitate integration. In the article which follows, **Katla Kjartansdóttir** explores how visitors with diverse social and cultural backgrounds explore the exhibition: 'The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðhol' (2018) at the National Museum of Iceland. Kjartansdóttir conducted interviews where she worked with participants to see how their understanding of marginalized and isolated groups changed based on their experience with this exhibition. The final submission by **Elli Leventaki** it is a review of the

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exhibition: 'Anatomy of Political Melancholy', which draws on issues of injustice and migration in the context of Athens, Greece. This review takes us through the exhibition, giving us a first-hand understanding of how it dealt with these topics, with Leventaki describing this as a mirror image of how artists have previously engaged with these themes, and how this might be the purpose of this exhibition, and that we might need to begin thinking of alternative ways of questioning our approach.

We feel these submissions, alongside the shorter accounts dispersed throughout issue 24, add to the debate around what a museum is today, and portray a diverse and exciting range of insights into how museums are engaging with current social and political issues through exhibitions and programming, and how they might explore this in new ways in the future.

Finally, we would like to thank our team of Editors: **Tom Eaton, Christine Hristova, Jenni Hunt, Sheng-Yen Lin, Blaire Moskowitz and Kristina Dzedzic Wright** for their valuable work and insights, along with our group of anonymous peer-reviewers. A thank you also to the School of Museum Studies' members of staff and PhD community for their fantastic support.

**Laura Dudley and Eloisa Rodrigues**

Editors-in-Chief, Issue 24, Museological Review, June 2020



# What is in a Museum Definition?

## Reflections on ICOM's New Museum Definition

By Dr Yunci Cai

In 2019, ICOM unveiled a new definition for consideration following a consultation with its members. The new definition states that:

*Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.*

The new definition sparked intense debates among members of the museum community, both at the ICOM Kyoto 2019 where a collective decision was taken to defer the new definition for future deliberation, and elsewhere as the debates took on a new lease of life on online discussions on various print and social media as well as through consultations by museum associations in different countries.

So what makes defining the museum so challenging? A universal museum definition needs to satisfy the different needs of diverse genres of museums operating under a variety of historical, economic, social, political, and cultural contexts. In practice, we are confronted with some incompatible ideals, values, and principles that make achieving some consensus about what a museum means extremely tricky.

The dilemma of defining the museum underscores a clash

of values. Do we focus on lofty ideals and sacred cows, such as the preservation, management, and interpretation of museum collections, and be silent about the underlying value dissonance and wider politics in society about who the museum really represent? Or do we want to acknowledge some of these wider societal injustices we still face, and make explicit our sustained commitment to challenge the status quo to make the museum and our world a more inclusive and accessible place to live in?

Museums, especially national museums, are widely considered to be instruments for legitimising state narratives and projecting social values. The new definition carries a value judgement that democratic political systems are better than authoritarian ones, a position that some states obviously disagree. Understandably, the mention of 'democratising', 'inclusive' and 'social justice' will put off some actors, especially those in authoritarian regimes or societies where marginal or minority voices are being suppressed. But to be silent on these attributes means we make no effort in demanding that these actors to live up ideals of inclusivity and respect for different groups, including marginalised communities.

The museum can be a space of liberation or a space of repression, depending on whose ideals and what values are being represented and promoted in the museum. In today's world dominated by divisive politics, the museum can emerge as an inclusive forum to promote respect and dignity for all people where everyone, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, can have a place that they call their own. How museums speak to contemporary issues and be relevant to our society at large should form the crux of our discussion on ICOM's new museum definition.

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# What is a museum to you today?

When we opened the call for papers for Issue 24 concerning the debate around the new definitions of museums proposed by ICOM, we decided to also open a call for smaller definitions, asking what a museum is to **you**. We were overwhelmed by the response we received: over 40 submissions from museum professionals, PhD candidates, MA students, arts and creative professionals amongst others.

Throughout Issue 24 you will find these definitions on these yellow pages dispersed between academic articles, visual submissions, exhibition reviews and book reviews.

Leeds Museums and Galleries are striving for a co-created service through our structures, our programmes and collections and our policies. Although we are still developing our learning in terms of this, we are also starting to look beyond co-creation to models of ABCD (asset based community development) practice. An ABCD model assumes that the power the change the community comes from the community. With that in mind, we questioned the academic questions... what defines a museum? How do museums play a role in society? We believe we are, and should be, defined by the communities around us. This goes further than contemporary collecting to represent the city, co-curating to work with people to hear their voices, or even working to diversify the workforce. It means active social change being driven by the communities with us to make wider changes to health, wellbeing, and learning. Our definition goes beyond temporal exhibitions, programming, and projects, and focuses instead on people and places, communities and collections. But, who writes this narrative? It should be people in the communities in which we live and work. As a sector, if we only ask those with 'an MA or PhD in a relevant field' or those who are 'current practitioners in the field of museums', we live in an echo chamber. It perpetuates the myth outside the sector that we are 'the experts', we define what a museum is and people will come and be edified by learning. We may have had more formal training, but that doesn't mean our definitions of a museum are any more or less valid than the people who make Leeds their home. The value of a shared definition lies in the conversations we have together to make good things happen and make Leeds a better place to live.

**Kate Fellows**, Head of Learning and Access, Leeds Museums and Galleries

A museum collects stories. Stories that speak of humans' interaction with each other and the world around them, of the past, present and future. It safeguards those stories, and associated tangible and intangible material culture, and makes them widely accessible to all people. It encourages interaction, engagement, and participation in its storytelling and seeks diversity in its storytellers. A Museum prioritises social good over monetary gain.

**Erika Taylor**, Curator of Collections and Programs, Tweed Regional Museum

## Museological Review- What is a museum to **you** today?

Resilient.

Relevant.

Representative.

These are values that every visitor would agree with. Museums need to be able to weather storms. Museums need to reflect their societies. Museums need to be powerful forces to advocate for those who have been under-represented.

Museums are their workers. Every act a museum does, every exhibition, every conversation, every database entry, every meme is done by a worker (whether paid or unpaid) and it follows that it is our workers who define our museums. Who we are and what principles we hold will always fundamentally shape our institutions.

It follows that our workers (whether paid or unpaid) must be:

Resilient

Relevant

Representative of all society.

If these principles define our museums and galleries, they must define us and our colleagues too. Do they? Can we talk about a resilient workforce when zero-hour contracts are routine? Can we claim relevance when the majority of our staff are white, female and middle-class? Can we be representative as our workforce recruitment is slow to change?

At Fair Museum Jobs we see daily cases where recruitment favours those who “know the system” or who have financial privilege to work for free. We see organisations reject change so they can de-value equivalent experience and value only academic qualifications.

So what is a museum now? Today a museum is limited by its recruitment practices and strangling its own growth through poor policies.

Yet there is museum hope.

Museums have more than ever the potential to be places of hope. We see that hope through changes to job descriptions to be more inclusive, through the expansion of a variety of routes into the sector and how these changes are beginning to open us up so we can tell stories increasingly relevant to us all. We can show alternatives to status quo and ways to mitigate negative consequences of our actions on society and climate. To sustain this hope, we need to change our workforce and to give us all hope.

**Fair Museum Jobs** is a grassroots collective movement advocating for museum job recruitment that is based on the principles of fairness, transparency, equity and inclusivity.

# Democratising Power Relations in Art Institutions

By Nanna Balslev Strøjer

## Abstract

MoMA's recent launch of the 'New MoMA' (October 2019) serves as a point of departure for a critical reflection on a general tendency in the museum landscape to promote inclusion and democracy. Bourdieu's *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* provide the theoretical framework for an investigation of museum genealogy questioning its very capacity for democracy. Following Rancière's (2009) appeal for the emancipation of the spectator, this paper sheds light on the great paradox of the museum as both the enabler and inhibitor for democratic action. Unpacking this paradox, the paper provides various examples of art exhibitions, such as *There is no* (2017) at Nordnorsk Museum, which have actively furthered inclusion by democratising the regimes of art and knowledge production - ultimately making the argument that there is no such thing as 'half-open'. Openness requires commitment and museums must acknowledge that in order to make way for aesthetic action and democracy.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Inclusion, Power, Art, Museums

## We Are Open

In February 2019, Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, in New York announced the launch of the 'New MoMA' - an expanded campus and "reimagined presentation of modern and contemporary art" (press.moma.org, 2019a) that opened in October 2019. As the press release and website informed, the motivation for the upcoming \$450m expansion was inspired by the first director of the museum Alfred H. Barr's (1929-1943) original ambition for MoMA to be an experimental museum. Consequently, "the real value of this expansion is not just more space, but space that allows us to rethink the experience of art in the Museum" as Glenn D. Lowry, The David Rockefeller Director of The Museum of Modern Art, stated in the press release (MoMA, 2019a). Along with an architectural expansion to make room for the increased focus on live programming, performance, film and new media, and a rehanging of the collection to further diversity and representation, a central addition to the New MoMA was the launch of The Crown Creativity Lab - a space where "you'll be able to drop in anytime to participate in lively conversations, engage with artists, make art, reflect and relax" (MoMA, 2019b) as well as "programs that connect people more deeply with art and each other." (MoMA, 2019a).

Following the opening in October 2019, the Crown Creativity Lab was inhabited by the ongoing participatory programme the People's Studio, clearly hinting at MoMA's wish to communicate the museum as a space to and for the people. Given that the 'New MoMA' has only existed for less than six months, it would be both insufficient and unfair to perform any type of analysis or assessment of its success, but it can be considered an example of a growing tendency for museums to communicate values of openness and inclusion. As MoMA points out, it had been Alfred Barr's intention from the institution's beginning that the museum should be perceived as a public, dynamic laboratory. Does the introduction of the People's Studio suggest that this original mission was not being fulfilled, or is the programme simply a continuation of MoMA's public outreach goals from its outset? If the new is the old, the question remains whether it is somehow ingrained in the genealogy of the museum to be undemocratic and, therefore, inherently unable to live up to its ambitions to be open and inclusive? In order to examine these questions, this paper investigates democracy as a process of anti-domination rather than a social order.

### A New, Old Museum

Even if MoMA and many of the other museums and art institutions referred to in this paper were founded in the twentieth century, or even the twenty-first century, they are undeniably still shaped by the very idea of the museum that came as one of the many outcomes of the French revolution. Therefore, in this context, the concept of ‘the museum’ is fairly new – replacing centuries of art only made for and accessible to the nobility or as symbols of power of state and religion. The dismantling of the monarchy after the French Revolution paved the way for the royal collections to be made public, resulting in the opening of the Louvre in 1793. The Louvre is important to mention here as it conveys an essential shift in power from monarchy to state – and, perhaps even more important, the birth of an ideology linking art and civic virtues. As Tony Bennett writes in *The Birth of the Museum*, the museum was considered a “sanctuary of the example through which civic virtues were to be instilled in the public” (1995, p. 37). The museum as an institution and the role of the arts then



Image 1: Exterior view of The Museum of Modern Art, Photography by Iwan Baan, Courtesy of MoMA

differed greatly from what we today consider ‘a museum’ or ‘an exhibition’. However, it is important to point to the fact that inherent in the foundation of the public museum (in a Western tradition) was distribution of power. The museum was built on (the newfound) state governing. The ‘modern’ museum came with Modernity, bringing a new role to the museum as a space of representation, rather than a space of wonder and surprise. Natural and cultural artefacts were to be displayed for the sake of enlightenment and to increase the knowledge and understanding of Western and Western-governed culture. Moreover, the museum was to be considered a social space in contrast to the private and restricted form, which had preceded it and excluded large parts of the population. Albeit, one must consider that the motivation for the museum to implement the virtues of the modern museum (openness and inclusion) was for the museum to “function

as a space of emulation in which civilised forms of behaviour might be learnt and thus diffused more widely through the social body” (Bennett, 1995, p. 24). The museum was, in other words, governmental instruments fashioned to inspire and enlighten the public to become wholesome beings and for the good and polite manners of the bourgeoisie to ‘rub off’ on the working class. Accordingly, inherent in the formation of the modern public museum was a tension between openness and control, between representation and politics – initiating “a close relationship between the government of the state and the government of the self” (Bennett, 1995, p. 23).

This universalist way of thinking, of equating representation and reasoning, has led to an ambivalent type of ‘double representation’, where man is both considered the object and subject of knowledge. Bennett describes what he refers

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to as the 'exhibitionary complex': "There is [...] a tension within this space of representation between the apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man) which it constructs, and the always socially partial and particular ways in which this universality is realised and embodied in museum displays." (Bennett, 1995, p. 7). As Bennett delineates, museum visitors are led to believe that they get exposed to 'the bigger picture' while in reality they are concealed from the true, underlying power structures – and thereby kept docile, believing themselves to be in a position to freely analyse themselves. Michel Foucault uses the concept of Panopticon to illustrate a concrete example of a disciplinary power system, a prison, in which the inmates are complicit in their own disciplining because they are at constant risk of observation. In the same manner, the public museum is performing similar types of disciplinary mechanisms, incarcerating the public through hidden power structures. Another relevant dimension in Foucault's perception of power is the symbiotic relation between power and knowledge asserted through discourse. He states: "We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (Foucault, 1989, p. 27).

### Powerful Knowledge

While the Foucaultian power-game is a universal principle operating in any field of knowledge, the public art museum is a particularly well-suited example of a self-sustainable demonstration of power referring to, and elevated by, the museum itself. In fact, the public art museum imposes an economy of discourses of truth, governing what there is to know. Foucault states "It is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (1979, p. 6). The crucial point being that museums have

been, and still are, an essential part of the accumulation and production of meaning and knowledge – and even if the intent had been to promote a 'universalist' thinking, it was effectively a part of a systematic social exclusion and succeeding interconnection between capitalism and meaning production.

Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the modern art gallery evolves around this exact differentiation between classes and connection, between economic capital and meaning. Bourdieu argues that it is not a mere case of distinction between behaviour of classes but the cultural capital that the museum affirms and reproduces. Cultural capital is a 'habitus', a term coined by Bourdieu to describe symbols, ideas and preferences acting as power resources in social action. In his 1979 work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Bourdieu writes "The appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally (although they have the appearance of innateness), these products are subject to exclusive appropriation, material or symbolic, and, functioning as cultural capital [...]" (1979, p. 228). Making an analogy to economic capital, cultural capital is just as much an asset that can be accumulated and invested in. As cultural capital is a 'habitus', a way of acting, it can be passed on from generations – thereby reproducing class inequalities. Accordingly, Bourdieu criticises the concept of 'good taste' and argues that any cultural preferences are embedded in structures of perception, judgement and action formed by social condition: "The official differences produced by academic classifications tend to produce (or reinforce) real differences by inducing in the classified individuals a collectively recognised and supported belief in the differences, thus producing behaviours that are intended to bring real life being into line with official being" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 7).

Bourdieu's project is not to declare the existence of an objective truth. Rather, he is interested in shedding light on the connection between power and (cultural) knowledge, between the social body and meaning production – a connection that becomes particularly visible within the museum. Tony

Bennett reflects: “[To Bourdieu] the art gallery’s capacity to function as an instrument of social distinction depends on the fact that only those with the appropriate kinds of cultural capital can both see the paintings on display and see through them to perceive the hidden order of art which subtends their arrangement” (1996, p. 35). In other words; Bourdieu assigns art (or culture) subjective meaning production. Art is not just to be seen, art is to be understood – provided a person is equipped with the right tools to do so.

### **To Know, Or Not To Know**

In a 1960 interview, Alfred Barr, who was still an active presence at MoMA at the time, was quoted saying “The public is often slow to comprehend; critics and museum people are notoriously blind”, thereby insinuating that there is something to be understood, something beyond mere representation. However, interestingly enough, Barr also called attention to the blindness of ‘his own kind’, which, even if his intention most likely was to deflate the growing critique of his institution, illustrates Jacques Rancière’s perception of the inherent relation between politics and aesthetics (Barr, 1960). Rancière recognises Bourdieu’s position in understanding culture’s capacity to produce and reproduce power differences among social classes. However, Rancière criticises Bourdieu for being part of the very same system that he denounces. In *Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge*, he writes ‘Bourdieu’s judgement, and that of all those who denounce the aesthetic illusion, rests on a simple alternative: you know or you do not [on connaît ou on méconnaît]’ (Rancière, 2006, p. 2). By articulating their ‘not knowing’, Bourdieu simultaneously reinforces their status as being ‘subaltern’, according to Rancière.

Rancière illustrates this complex relation, or movement, between actors in his 1987 book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, in which the French schoolmaster Joseph Jacotot practises what he calls ‘intellectual emancipation’ with his students - a method, or philosophy, that lets the students learn in their own right without being taught. Rancière writes: “The ignorant schoolmaster (...) is named thus not because he knows nothing, but because he has renounced the ‘knowledge

of ignorance’ and thereby uncoupled his ‘mastery from his knowledge. He does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified: What is unknown to him is the inequality of intelligence.” (2009, p. 49). Briefly explained, Rancière describes how the dissolving of the teacher/pupil (master/slave) dichotomy is a fundamental precondition for equality. In opposition to what Rancière (1991) calls the ‘old method’ practised by ‘The Old Master’, the ignorance of the ignorant schoolmaster, is a ‘positive’ thing as it presupposes equality - and thereby lays the foundation for intellectual emancipation. In this Socraterian logic, claiming to be ‘open’ and ‘inclusive’ puts the museum in a position as ‘the old master’ (the knowledgeable), thereby eliminating any real potential for democratic processes to happen.

Similarly, Rancière uses theatre as an analogy to call for the intellectual emancipation of the spectator: “According to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons: First; viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second; it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive.” (2009, p. 2)

On the grounds that the spectator is never actually in a position to act as he/she is only presented to the ‘the spectacle’, to the illusion, Rancière calls for the emancipation of the spectator. The upholding of the dominating principles through insisting on the action, or participation, of the spectator is one of the great paradoxes of the museum, as they continue to advocate openness and inclusion. The ambiguity lies in that, through promoting values of openness and inclusion, they are simultaneously endorsing the dominating principles and fixates the visitor in his/her passivity. Professor of geography and heritage studies Divya P. Tolia-Kelly stresses the paradoxical core of existence for the museum: “The museum space is where epistemologies, taxonomies and exhibitionary logics are seemingly dynamic, but are at once ‘fixed’, and in synthesis with imperial hierarchies of culture [...] (2019,

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p. 129). She continues referencing Rancière: “Democracy is produced and legitimated through aesthetic practices and in turn creates the shackles that bound what can be termed aesthetics” (Tolia-Kelly, 2019, p. 126). In other words, the museum is both the solution and the problem. Rancière asks rhetorically, “But could we not invert the terms of the problem by asking if it is not precisely the desire to abolish the distance that creates it?” (2009, p. 12). However, if trying to reduce the distance between the art/museum and the viewer only reinforces it, have we reached a curatorial impasse?

### The Third Thing

It is essential to understand that, according to Rancière, democracy is not a societal or governmental structure. Democracy should be understood as a process, or rather, as a movement that works to redistribute the dominating principles (what is permissible to say or to show) and to enlarge the public sphere. The democratic process is inherently aesthetic and, therefore, has the power to usurp the dominating principles of truth and representation. The problem is, that when the aesthetics succumb to the regime (as in a museum), they are only reproducing the excluding didactics. The artist, curator and the spectator must therefore continuously insist on themselves as democratic beings - not as a producer and receiver, but as a whole. According to Rancière, “what is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs” (2009, p. 4). What he means by this quote is not to make an exhibition without visitors, or to make more initiatives to activate the audience, but rather to dissolve the producer-receiver relation. Rancière describes, “It is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect” (2009, p. 15). The question is, how does this ‘third thing’ appear - and how can curators actively work towards it?

Tolia-Kelly, who has worked with artist Rosanna Raymond

to disrupt (post)colonial narratives in the British Museum, London, writes: “Aesthetics, produced through artistic practices, are locked into an elite world of networks of production and self-perpetuating representational reference points, and thus the dismantling of the ways we think of artistic regimes of production can contribute to a more democratic politics and aesthetics. By equalising the regimes of the spaces of art production with the formal accounts of political democracy, we are able to see exposed the partiality or indeed the hegemonic power of both regimes”. (2019, p. 125).

Accordingly, by exposing the regimes, we equalise them, and thereby open up to new translations and new meanings to form. It is a matter of ‘equalising’ through transparency - of letting the spectator ‘backstage’, so to speak. As Bennett explains, the role of the curator ought to: “be shifted away from that of the source of an expertise whose function is to organise a representation claiming the status of knowledge and towards that of the possessor of a technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it”. (1995, p. 103).

Even if the role of the curator has undergone a dramatic change since 1995, Bennet’s observations of a problematic divide between knowledge production and dissemination remain relevant. The administration of a museum, its governance process and the decisions made therein are rarely accessible to the public. As Professor Graham Murdock demonstrates, “the battle to keep free entry [to museums] is vital but unless policy also addresses the ways collections are compiled, promoted and presented, the organisation of arts education on a life-long basis, and the relations between professional expertise and vernacular creativity, its impact will be limited” (2010, p. 63). In essence, museums claim that they belong to the public, but how much of the institution and its activities can the public actually access? One might compare it to a dinner party where the guests are only allowed into the corridor. The host encourages them to feel at home, yet an awareness of the social and spatial restrictions induces



an equally restricted behaviour.

### Backstage

In 1974 American artist Michael Asher (1943 - 2012) demolished the wall between the office and the exhibition space at Claire Copley gallery in Los Angeles and framed the art gallery's 'behind-the-scenes' business operations as the exhibition itself. As art historian Kirsi Peltomäki notes, 'The important implication of the work was the manner in which it foregrounded the 'pre-existing power-knowledge axis' inherent to conventionally accepted social relations and divisions within the gallery' (2007, p. 41). The workplace itself in this project functions as an example of how aesthetics have the potential to disrupt the dominating principles per Rancièrian terminology. There are certainly numerous examples of artists, who have worked in this type of framework, both politically and conceptually, but what is particularly interesting, in the context of this article, are examples of artists and curators who have actively worked to increase transparency by democratising the regimes of art production and knowledge production. In the following, the paper examines concrete examples of recent exhibitions and curatorial methods, which in different ways have created platforms for democratic processes to emerge. In 2017, Canadian artist Joshua Schwebel opened his exhibition *Aesthetics of Administration* at Centrum project space in Berlin. The exhibition essentially started when Schwebel

approached Berlin's arts-funding administration, the *Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa*, in an email, inviting staff members to produce artworks for his show. Two staff members replied to Schwebel's unusual request and both their proposals were subsequently included in the show. One work was Pauline Püschel's interactive installation *Limits* inviting visitors to sit at an office desk (from the senate's basement) and navigate through a computer program mimicking the daily operations of a funding administrator. Throughout the day you could 'accept' to fund various projects, which then had to be properly motivated, printed and filed alphabetically. Another work was Anne Wesolek's series of photographs, entitled *Inside Brunnenstraße*, which showed the senate's personal offices - stacks of paper, post-its, lists, cables, coffee mugs, graph-paper charts and more. The exhibition not only invited visitors 'behind-the-scenes' of an organisation usually invisible to the public, but it reversed the role of administrator and producer, directly pointing to inherent power structures in the system. As Schwebel (2017) explained, 'It also made visible the personal aesthetics and opinions of the administrators of public arts funding, who normally remain unrepresented and unconsidered in the cultural landscape of Berlin, but have great power to determine the definition and determination of contemporary art'. By revealing the hidden structures of art world bureaucracy, politics and capitalism, through the use of aesthetics, Schwebel began an emancipation of the spectator. Two other examples, which



Image 2: Michael Asher, *Untitled*, (1974), Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles



Image 3: Joshua Schobel, installation view *From the Aesthetic of Administration*, 2017, image credit Ute Klein.



Image 4 Cinthia Marcelle, *1st Meeting of the Legendaries at KW Institute for Contemporary Art/Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art* (Aus der Serie *From the series Legendaries*, 2008–fortlaufend ongoing), 2018 Analog fotografie, Metallplatte, Dokument Analogue photography, metal plaque, document, Courtesy Cinthia Marcelle Foto Photo Timo Ohler

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worked to critically further transparency, are Brazilian artist Cinthia Marcelle's contribution to the 10th Berlin Biennial (9 June - 9 September 2018), We don't need another hero, and curator/artist collective Pro tempore.art's exhibition Bestseller at Copenhagen-based gallery Bo Bjerggaard. Marcelle's work *Lendários do CCSP (Legendaries of CCSP)* shown at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art is part of an ongoing series in which she invites regular employees from a given art institution, in this case the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, to participate in a ceremonial social gathering. During the event a group portrait is taken using an analogue camera. The portrait is subsequently framed and accompanied by a metal plaque and a document vouching for the authenticity of the event. A key element to Marcelle's practice is disturbing the usual order of things by staging situations in which otherwise hidden structures may reveal themselves. As artists and writer Thulile Gamedze precisely puts it:

Abandoning the insularity of a straightforward institutional critique, the work gestures towards the people who have helped shape the character of a given institution as a step in the direction of abandoning modernist institutional mythology. In addition, this focus on a handful of individuals ultimately hints at something very powerful: a shift in the mode of engagement with institutions—investing in sociality as the home of everyday knowledge practice and culture-making (2018).

Along the same lines was the exhibition *Bestseller* curated by pro tempore.art at Gallery Bo Bjerggaard in June 2019. Pro tempore.art is committed to produce ultra-short exhibitions in between exhibition schedules at Copenhagen top galleries. They are 'placing emerging into the established; breaking the ordinary framework of exhibitions, creating waves within the gallery scene and challenging the traditional structures of the art world' (pro tempore.art, 2019). For *Bestseller*, pro tempore.art focused particularly on commercial and capitalistic influences in artwork production. The catalogue included, for example, screen dumps of the artist's lists of expenses and email correspondences discussing logistics and budgets, letting the reader in on 'all the secrets' preceding the

professional looking white cube exhibition.

For any curator or museum professional feeling antsy about the prospect of exposing the office's excel sheets or posing for a portrait, producing transparency does not have to be as literal as suggested in the aforementioned examples. We might compare the role of the curator to that of the schoolmaster. The museum should not 'teach' but rather facilitate an emancipatory environment for the viewer to make their own sense of things. Two additional examples of museums/kunsthallen that have successfully managed to transpose common power structures and created the grounds for democratic processes are discussed as models of curatorial processes that facilitate a liberating experience for viewers.

### All-Inclusive

In the autumn of 2017, Copenhagen-based kunsthalle Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art acted as hosts of the large-scale immersive performance-installation *Sisters Academy - The Boarding School* created by the performance group and movement *Sisters Hope*. It might even be misleading to call Den Frie 'hosts', as the kunsthalle was nothing more than the architectural frame of the project during the one month of performance. Several of the staff members took part in the 'all-inclusive' performance, where visitors booked 24-hour accommodations, leaving sleep and diet in the hands of the performers. The entire kunsthalle was transformed leaving no signs of its function as an art institution - no reception desk and ticketing system, no posters, 'no access' sign, nothing - even the toilets were transformed to fit the experience of a new world order - of a space to explore new modes of sensuous learning with the 'Sisters teaching staff'. During that one month, *Sisters Hope* did not only intervene in the daily lives of its boarders but, through aesthetic action, they disrupted the routine of the institution creating an ideal platform for emancipation.

Another brilliant example is the 2017 surprise transformation of Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum into a museum dedicated to Saami art. When the museum opened its doors to the exhibition *There is no in spring* of 2017, not a single soul had



Image 5 and 6: Sisters Academy at Den Frie. Photo: Sisters Hope

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been let in on the experience awaiting. The entire museum, both inside and outside, had been transformed and replaced with Saami works from the past century. All signs of Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, including the website, had been changed into the 'Sámi Dáiddamusea'. The overall performative project of Sámi Dáiddamusea and the accompanying exhibition indigenised and decolonised the museum by giving voice to the Saami people, who had yet to be acknowledged through their own museum. Through this aesthetic action, the project paved the way for intellectual emancipation and produced democracy by exposing the cultural capital governed by museums.

*There is no cleverly demonstrated that a traditional museum exhibition is still very much a valid medium, whilst illustrating how we must continuously work to expose structures by making ourselves equally exposed. Without action, without letting the guest in 'backstage', the openness, dialogue and 'lively' conversations, promoted by MoMA and so many other institutions, are really nothing more than, to speak in Platonian terms, shadows on the cave wall.*

## Conclusion

MoMA's 2019 launch of 'New MoMA' is an example of an increasing tendency in museums and art institutions promoting democratic values of openness and inclusion. Taking departure point in the specific case, moving into theory, and back into practice illustrates the paradoxical position that many curators and art institutions find themselves in when navigating in an art world governed by politics. The museum is a politically charged space formed by traditions, connotations, hierarchies and power relations, consequently making it both the solution and the problem. In the attempt to eliminate the distance between work and viewer, museums and curators easily end up enforcing their own position as the 'knowledgeable' - and thereby practically dissolve the potential for democratic processes to happen. The artist, curator and the spectator must therefore continuously insist on themselves as democratic beings - not as a producer and receiver, but as a whole. The provided examples of exhibitions and performative work, supported by theories of Foucault, Bourdieu and Rancière, suggest curatorial methods to dismantle the ways we think of artistic regimes of production. Most significant, the paper pointed to the fact that democracy does not occur if hosts only invite guests into their corridor. A true democratic



Image 7: Sámi Dáiddamusea åpningskvelden - Photo: Tomasz A Wacko

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process of inclusion and openness cannot happen on the basis of a spectacle, it must be done through the aesthetic exposition of the spectacle itself. One cannot be half-open - openness commits, and curators and art institutions must acknowledge that in order to make way for aesthetic action. By handing over the museum keys to a marginalised group, like at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, or turning bureaucracy upside-down, like Joshua Schwebel did at Centrum in Berlin, regimes of art and knowledge production are recognised and opened up to new readings - thereby creating potential for intellectual emancipation and democracy. It is not simply a matter of letting visitors into the institution's back offices or sharing receipts and email passwords, but a general process for curators and art institutions to be conscious of the unavoidable power structures governing them, and then take action to use these power structures aesthetically to expose them.

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Museums are democratic arenas of storytelling that promote equality, diversity and humanity. Narratives may concern the past, the present, the future or even the imaginary. Exhibits can be both tangible and intangible, analogue and digital, modern and postmodern, as long as they can be perceived by one or more of the five senses.

Museums are collectively shaped institutions, inclusive and open to the public. Operating as active areas of inspiration, education and creation, they are non-binary, non-racially, non-religiously and non-class biased. Their purpose is to engage society and contribute to the community, by ensuring that cultural heritage remains safe and accessible to all. In addition, by studying, interpreting and sharing history, they encourage each generation to deal with its past in order to avoid similar mistakes.

Museums, with or without walls, are non-profit organizations, which are influenced neither by private interests nor by government policies. They are flexible, up-to-date and able to adapt to current circumstances, while keeping up with the ever-evolving reality. Their ability to rise to the occasion and face the challenges of each period with dignity renders them pillars of freedom, sustainable knowledge and innovative thinking.

**Elli Leventaki**, Art Historian/Curator and Independent Researcher

I've worked in the museum world for decades and not given a thought to ICOM's definition. In 2007, ICOM defined museums as "permanent institutions in service of society." Before thinking about its proposed definition, think about that line. How many of you think of your institutions in service to society? And how inclusive is your definition of society? There is a lot contained in those six words

The new definition asks us to stop pussyfooting around and tell our collections' stories in transparent, authentic ways, connecting past with present, telling the whole, complicated story. It asks us to "contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing." Contributing is a loaded word. Is doing the regular museum things enough? Or must we take a stand? And does taking a stand affect development, collecting, programming, and exhibitions, blurring the line between individual values and organizational ones? Does it mean we support our staff members who openly protest? Would that mean the local historical museum stands with its local human rights organization when a member of our community is about to be deported?

Museum land in the age of Google is different. Whether ICOM arrives at consensus or not, we are the ones who must change. Because if we don't, the public, who has the entire world in words and images on their phones, will go somewhere else for information, for history, for tranquility, for a civics lesson, for connection or simply to see people who look like them? So regardless, it's up to us.

Listen. Know what you don't know. Know what your collection means, not just in a textbook sense, but in the context of your community. Find and make meaningful connections, person to person, object to person, collections to community. Make museums matter.

**Joan Baldwin**, Curator of Special Collections at The Hotchkiss School

How museums are defined and perceived has changed significantly, through expectations of how a museum ought to act as perceived by its considered local community and wider community. Visitor perceptions also impact upon how museums are defined and in turn how they exist and develop. There is growing societal awareness surrounding the ethical foot print of museums and those that enable existence and development of the 'museum business' and what is offered to visitors.

A traditional definition often focuses on what a museum is and the role of the museum in giving access to and engaging with audiences. Visitor interaction is a key part of defining museums. It is an area that can present some challenges surrounding the tangibility of variables such as where a museum seeks to welcome, encourage, challenge, provoke and engender support. The role of words in visitor engagement isn't just about being heard and the emotions that can be evoked by the physical interaction, it is the sense of personal acknowledgement in the museum setting that holds significant value.

Digital platforms have a significant influence on how a museum is defined within a broader sense in regard to the potential ability to engage in a digital sense and develop a more enduring cyclical relationship with a museum, a relationship that has the potential to bring more benefit to both the museum and the visitor. As the relationship develops the nature of the interaction evolves from the short term interaction with an exhibition for example to deepening engagement through research or volunteering for example (Marty, 2007).

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**Rachel Coman**, MA Museum Studies via distance learning, University of Leicester

#### A Museum is a Radical Social Hub

Museums are custodians of the past but also gateways to our futures. If we don't understand the context of our histories we cannot understand our place in the world or what we might become. Museums have a duty to tell historic stories that include everyone in society and ensure their collections reflect the diversity of human beings. They also have an obligation to work with communities to reflect these authentic narratives in their own words. Democratising Museums and Collections in this way will provide a platform for people to come together to better understand and value each other. It could also challenge prejudice and fear and provide a safe environment to discuss today's challenges in the context of reflecting on the past.

**Esther Fox**, Head of Accentuate Programme at Screen South, Folkestone, Kent



## Book Review

# Extinct Monsters to Deep Time: Conflict, Compromise, and the Making of Smithsonian's Fossil Halls by Diana E Marsh

By Ava Salzer

“Extinct Monsters to Deep Time: Conflict, Compromise, and the Making of Smithsonian's Fossil Halls” is a close analysis of the exhibition design process for a permanent installation that confronts the important contemporary topics of climate change and extinction. The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History's newly refurbished fossil hall (opened 2019), “Deep Time,” is intended to address the reality of climate change, prompting, “individuals to think about their own impact on the planet” (Smithsonian Institution, 2019). Through interpretation, interactive displays (including a window into a working fossil lab) and over 600 objects from the collection, the Smithsonian's largest exhibition redesign explores ancient ecosystems, evolution and the way that humanity is propelling drastic changes in the planet's climate (Smithsonian Institution, 2019). Marsh's research uses this exhibition as a case study of internal processes of collaborative museum work.

The book is inspired in part by a critical reaction to the Smithsonian's mission statement that promises “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” and it examines the intersection of research and outreach in contemporary museum practice. Marsh's argument centres on the tensions between research and outreach and the friction in collaborative processes

between people representing different specialties. This work shows that this friction is paired with complementarity (respect within a diverse group) and can be extremely constructive. Marsh examines the strained relationship between research and outreach in three primary areas, “among increasingly interdisciplinary staff... in debates about the exhibit content development... [and] amid a broader institutional culture” (Marsh, 2019: 15).

Marsh uses an ‘ethnohistorical’ approach, pulling from archives, historical and contemporary sources. She also makes use of observation and interviews from her presence amongst the “Deep Time” exhibition design project team as an observing researcher. Marsh's work is thorough and balanced and offers a unique perspective and research method. The book delivers significant findings for museological practice when producing and presenting information on important topics to the public.

This work reviews the history of the Smithsonian, examining changes in visitor experience, sponsorship and staff roles. Simultaneously, Marsh performs ethnographic research whilst amongst the “Deep Time” team. This dual approach gives unique insight and allows for the development of a



Image 1: An overhead view of the Deep Time main exhibition hall (Angela Roberts Reeder, Smithsonian Magazine, 2019)

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more rounded understanding of the complex, collaborative, intensive and friction-fraught process of producing exhibitions. Marsh argues that friction is important, leading to increased creativity and better, more balanced exhibits (Marsh, 2019: 15, 225). Throughout the work Marsh details the highly collaborative and contentious process of creating everything from exhibition themes to text, images and displays. Marsh explains that the often disagreement-filled, collaborative methodology with “experts who don’t in fact agree” is a strong one (Marsh, 2019: 255). This methodology supports the museum as a place well suited to work with important, and often difficult, topics like climate change.

“Extinct Monsters” begins with an explanation of the historical foundation for the Smithsonian fossil halls, giving context for later incarnations. Here, Marsh describes the earliest manifestations of the displays from their opening through to the immediate post war 1950s and their focus on science and classification. Chapter 2 gives an overview of those involved in the creation of exhibits. The various staff participants are described, as are the means by which they are separated in the museum space and how they communicate and perceive one another across those divides.

Chapter 3 unravels the institutional evolution of the Smithsonian after WWII, pinpointing sources of change in finances, staff organisation and designation. The fourth chapter has its focus in the “Deep Time” exhibit. Marsh’s narrative follows the project’s development and describes these tensions expressed during discussions of exhibition

content. Chapter 5 takes a broader approach, examining the contexts (artistic, thematic and scientific) behind debates on contemporary exhibitions. The longstanding qualities of contemporary exhibits in “storylines, hierarchic messaging and labels, colours, wayfinding and maps, elaborate design, media techniques, and holistic experience” are traced back to their post-war roots (Marsh, 2019: 210). Marsh discusses how the shifts from the post-war era were focused not only on exhibition design but also on the aim of exhibits and their intended effect on the public. This time of change was the origin of the museum’s emphasis on using new methods to connect collections with complex scientific ideas for the benefit of the public (Marsh, 2019: 210).

The focus in Chapter 6 moves to contexts of the Smithsonian as an institution. Emphasis here is on the post-war shift from research to outreach. Marsh argues that this move from research to outreach and the National Museum of Natural History’s response to it shed light on contemporary frictions and disconnects within the museum’s departments and staff.

The book’s concluding chapter provides an overview of arguments, methods and aspirations. Marsh restates her focus on tensions within the museum’s exhibit planning process and the benefits of friction and complementarity in a collaborative effort. Hopes for applications in the wider museum field are expressed as are those for the outside world. Here, Marsh puts forth that friction and complementarity between participants of diverse areas of expertise within a collaborative project create possibilities for better museum work, including that



Image 2: The FossilLab in the Deep Time exhibition (Lucia Martino, 2019).

## Museological Review

which has at its core complicated and important topics like climate change.

Marsh's "Extinct Monsters to Deep Time: Conflict, Compromise, and the Making of Smithsonian's Fossil Halls" constitutes an effective close analysis of the Smithsonian's Fossil Halls and the exhibit design process via the multiple methods of historical research and contemporary case study. "Extinct Monsters" is a text relevant to the museum field and any discipline where collaborative projects are undertaken, and hefty social and scientific topics are tackled for presentation.

Findings in this work are new and useful, presenting evidence showing the benefits to 'friction and complementarity' whilst offering insights that can be used by other institutions and collaborative projects to achieve more balanced results in their work. This book helps to fill a gap in the field by bolstering the body of works on museum ethnography, a growing branch of museum studies (Mears & Wintle 2014, Durand 2010, Thurston 2017). "Extinct Monsters" contributes significantly to museum ethnography by delivering a thorough study to the existing body of work. The book adds to understandings of how museums function as communities that are composed of individual experts that form and circulate knowledge. This aspect of practical museology is crucial for museum studies as well as for other disciplines that examine informational institutions that serve and are responsible to the public. For museum researchers (myself included) the work serves as a fascinating example of multidimensional research in the field. "Extinct Monsters" highlights the difficult but worthwhile

process of taking an active role in tackling big questions of our time like climate change through museum exhibitions.

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Image 3: Display wall, "Humans Spread, Extinctions Follow," in the Deep Time Exhibition (Lucia Martino, 2019).

## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

Where do you start? Do you start with the staff or the artefacts? Or the building that houses the staff and the artefacts? Wherever you start, the answer is the same. Museums redefine themselves on a daily basis. Not by throwing out all their collections, but utilising them to answer the questions people wish to have answered.

A museum isn't defined by its collections, more by what they do with them. Because each generation of visitors (and staff) get their knowledge and information from different places and by different means. The speed of modern information provision brings its own redefinition and its own rules of acceptable dissemination of such information.

Gone are the days when a museum was a dark silent place full of glass cases with rarely changed displays. It's been reinvented (or redefined) into say, a centre for family history research or a place where PhD students may research, handle and discover pieces that make their thesis seem like a joy, not a task.

Museums commemorate and stimulate and provide a repository for ideas and tangible items. Young ones go to learn, and older ones go to remember. It is a hub, but one that can travel. Museums can escape the confines of a room or a gallery. My area is costume. I am not bound by a mannequin in a case. I link costume to buildings. To commerce. To groups who cannot come to the museum themselves.

Museums grow and change and prove that one person's definition of a modern museum is another person's definition of an old-fashioned museum. Or both. Or neither. It is like a Möbius strip really. Goes on and on and you end up back at the beginning.

**Stephanie Richards**, Curator of Costume, Henfield Museum, West Sussex

Originally a Temple to the Muses museums have transformed over the millennia from institutions servicing a niche in society with precious closely protected collections to now approaching the 2020s a vibrant socially networked community of digital temples to our societies muses; Activism, Politics, Sport, Science, Art ...the family of muses is large.

At a time of world political uncertainty, museums provide the cultural stability and growth society craves becoming more relevant in the process.

#GreenMuseums, #Museums4Climate #QueerMuseum, #HappyMuseum, & others all offer a home for the big issues and a place for reflection, education and evidenced information. I feel proud to work within a profession that actively adjusts, collects, conserves and shares factual material & digital evidence, documenting truth, impacting our lives.

No longer the exclusive castle of cis straight able bodied neurotypical rich white men at best hoping to improve the masses, Museums are increasingly aware of the importance of welcoming, involving, learning from and representing us all. Museums consist of buildings, websites, objects, voices, images, data, spaces; they are my home.

**Pierrette Squires**, Collections & Conservation Officer, Bolton Museum

Opposition to ICOM's proposed definition of a museum has come from across the spectrum of museum professionals and practices. I believe much of this discord emerges from how, despite being sold as a definition, it is a wholly aspirational statement that ignores the reality of museums today. We can hope the museums of tomorrow meet their communities' needs while acting as a forum for contemporary issues, and we can work towards this goal, but it is irresponsible to suggest that all museums are doing this today.

As an institution founded on hierarchy, violence, imperialism, and colonialism, the museum has never been "inclusive" or "polyphonic," and has only been "democratizing" recently and to a select audience. While there are strides being made towards these attributes, they are unevenly distributed, and the greater field continues to reflect its inequitable foundations.

Museums are also ever-evolving and broadening; qualifiers such as 'stewards' and 'non-profit' may be helpful identifiers of the moment, but do not encompass institutions that may exist outside of these paradigms and the inherently Western concept of the museum. A museum definition should reflect the changes and variety of the field.

Put simply, a museum is a place where people, things, and ideas are amassed and/or exhibited for consumption. Unlike other collecting or educational institutions, museums center on conservation, education, or knowledge-building using collections. These collections — physical and/or intangible — are anchored in a scope that can be as broad as 'encyclopedic art' and as specific as 'hats made in France, 1910-1930.' Through its functions, history, and trusted role in society, the museum is both a house and product of culture, the archive and the author of ideology, and the keeper and disrupter of worlds.

**Corrie Roe**, Production Coordinator, Science Visualization, American Museum of Natural History

During my nearly fifty years in the American museum field (as a curator, director, museum studies teacher, writer and consultant) my working definition of a museum is: A museum is a public service preservation organization that explains subjects through objects.

**Steven Miller**, Executive Director Emeritus, Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ

# Exhibition Review

## The New Museum of Modern Art

By Blaire M. Moskowitz

When the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was conceptualised in the 1920s, the Museum's founders 'perceived a need to challenge the conservative policies of traditional museums and to establish an institution devoted exclusively to modern art.' Then, in 1929, when the museum was created, it was intended 'to be dedicated to helping people understand and enjoy the visual arts of our time.' (MoMA, 2019) Now, a century later, with MoMA established as one of the world's preeminent art collections, the museum continues to adhere to these principles and has reconceptualised their strategy to better reflect present day understandings of modern and contemporary art and how people experience these works.

While MoMA could have used their newly increased space to continue telling the chronological and predominantly western history of modern art using the parameters that they themselves developed, they instead chose to start anew - just as the original founders had in 1920. Self-branded as 'the new MoMA', the museum presents a new approach for telling stories that reflects more diverse thinking in today's world. In the galleries, they reinstalled the entire exhibition space (drawing from 520,000 works and library holdings), sometimes by linking asynchronous time periods and distant locations.

The Collections Galleries are spread across Floor Two (1970s - Present), Floor Four (1940s-1970s), and Floor Five (1880s-1940s). The organization of each floor is a hodgepodge of galleries assigned either an artist, concept, medium, or painting. This varied structure enables the curators to reflect upon the actualities of the real world and to hang works by artists previously relegated to storage, but for visitors, a holistic narrative can be difficult to find and impossible to follow. The intended message is that modern art is interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, occurs across time, and is decreasingly dependent on

physical location, but are visitors who serendipitously browse following that train of thought? For the many visitors that are neither studying the labels nor listening to the audio tour, do they realize that a clever juxtaposition of adjacent artwork from two different eras and movements is demonstrating intergenerational or cross-cultural inspiration?

Regardless of how well the museum is alerting visitors to and explaining their new curatorial decisions, the canon of modern art is evolving. For example, Gallery 501 (Nineteenth Century Innovators) displays the traditional canon - for example Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889), Cezanne's *The Bather* (1898), etc.) - while the adjacent Gallery 502 (Early Photography and Film) demonstrates the new less upper-class, less male-dominant, and less white canon from the same time period with work by early female photojournalist Frances Benjamin Johnston and an excerpt of *The Cakewalk*, one of the "earliest feature length films with an all-black-cast" (Collection 1880s-1940s, 2019). Continuing into Gallery 503 (Around Les Demoiselles d'Avignon), the proximity of Faith Ringold's *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) and Louise Bourgeois' *Quarantania, I* (1947-53) to the famed Picasso encourages conversations about femininity and objectivity. Yet, steps later in Gallery 504 (New Expression in Germany and Austria), Egon Schiele's work is displayed without mentioning the controversies surrounding his paintings of young women; it is unclear why some works in the traditional canon have been confronted with modernity while others have not. Other works throughout the Collections Galleries are emboldened by their ability to stand on their own, without dependencies on other artworks. For instance, the object label next to Lee Krasner's 1949 painting *Untitled* (Gallery 403) describes how her Jewish culture inspired her, omitting her relationship to her more famous husband. Other curatorial decisions reflect recent surges in popularity and blockbuster

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temporary exhibitions both inside and outside MoMA: Jacob Lawrence has a full wall with sixty paintings from 1941 about the African American Experience (Gallery 402) and Hilma af Klint, subject of a surprise blockbuster at the Guggenheim New York, can be found in Gallery 504 (New Expression in Germany and Austria).

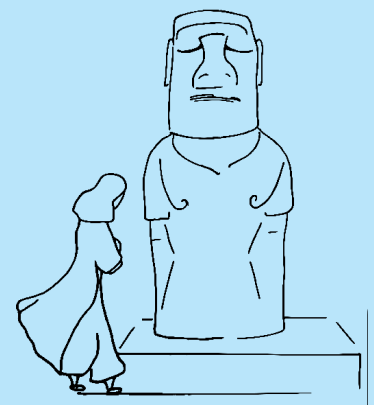
The reinstallation also provided opportunity in relation to the building's architecture. Absorbing the adjacent Folk Art Museum building (bringing the total space to 165,000 square feet) enabled architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Gensler to design sightlines that span through galleries, into atriums, past stairwells and up escalators. Since the rooms are organized by theme, these sightlines are purely aesthetic, but in every direction, they work remarkably well: Boris Bučan's posters (1982) peak out as one rides up the escalators to Floor Three while Pierre Paulin's 1967 Tongue Chair (model 577) (Gallery 3 North) is placed next to one of many windows overlooking Haegue Yang's *Handles* (2019) in the Atrium. The long sightlines make the museum appear to be "open concept" but the actual pathways people take are more prescribed.

The gallery spaces are a complex and seemingly endless labyrinth. Halfway through the experience, museum fatigue becomes overwhelming and the sheer size of the combined buildings (marked by another set of stairwells and a subtle change in architecture) as well as the massive volume of information begins to work against itself. Is MoMA just too big to enjoy on a single visit? The many strategically placed seating areas mitigate the fatigue and, along with the art-making areas open to all visitors, advance the concept of a museum as third place (Oldenburg, 1982): they are open to all visitors (who have paid the entry fee), they fulfil a need (comfortable seating, art supplies, and cafes), enable community (to discuss the art or participate in communal art-making), and there is no obligation to stay for set amounts of time (rest until ready to see more). These communal areas remain secondary to the exhibition spaces but prominent enough to influence the museum's "raison d'être".

The new MoMA reflects emerging views in the artworld as well as the ideas included in ICOM's proposed museum definition. The inclusion of new voices, fresh perspectives, designated areas for programming, and creativity labs demonstrates that the next generation of museums can be "democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures." (ICOM 2019) But while visitors are ready for significant and substantial curatorial progress, the behemoth of the museum itself has concurrently become too much to navigate in one visit. Let's hope that visitors decide to come back again.

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## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

A museum is where static history is unlearned and inclusive discussion is encouraged. Public institution interpretation is a vital element to creating dialogue. Museums have the duty to activate collective memory and remind us that community is vital to change. In an age of “alternative facts” and “fake media,” authenticity and relevance are two factors that should drive the mission. Museum artifacts act as the catalyst by providing first-hand experiences based upon memory and community nostalgia. Institutions are held in the public trust, which means being an agent of change and taking an active stance on community related issues when necessary.

Museums remain diverse, participatory institutions for supplemental and active learning. Progressive museum pedagogy emphasizes the actions of the learner as an active participant in the process. When done right, a museum can leave a lasting impression and provide memorable experiences that can last a lifetime by stimulating reflection and simultaneous engagement. Museums address conflicts and challenges by finding answers in the past, present, and future. Institutions should aim to inspire change of the social, political, and cultural sphere by providing thought-provoking outcomes and participation.

Museum interaction has become a necessary means of engaging audiences. A democratic learning environment is a standard of museum engagement. The development of the museum is based on re-evaluating what it means to learn; as the purpose of exhibits is to spark curiosity. Institutions continue to develop what it means to be present in the museum experience by bringing real world issues to the forefront through lectures, programs, and exhibits. Museums assess trends and adapt to those transition with engagement that caters to the virtual world. To further the mission of community engagement, institutions must keep striving for advanced methods of interactive exhibitions and storytelling that make progressive, cooperative learning environments.

**Amber Foster**, Curator of Batavia Depot Museum

A museum harnesses the potential of its community by collecting, preserving, and researching objects of significance; and by challenging people to explore and understand their humanity through exhibitions and public programs, while encouraging the responsible, thoughtful, and sustainable use of its cultural and financial resources

**Sean Thomson**, Accountant, Cincinnati Art Museum

**Emily Hampel**, Assistant to the Chief Financial Officer, Cincinnati Art Museum



Museums are places where people connect to ideas and other people through engagement with collections. Museums can be spaces for transformation, reflection, and innovation.

**Seema Rao**, Deputy Director and Chief Experience Officer, Akron Art Museum, Ohio.

**Museum** /mju:'ziəm/(from the Greek mousa, Old French musier, Latin musum) 1. to trace the etymological origins of the term museum is to detour through several possible meanings. 2. a museum might be read as some thing that inspires. some thing through which to speculate. some thing that silences. 3. definitions, like words, are semiotic technologies (Haraway, 1988); they carry meaning, affecting and shaping the ways in which we relate in more-than-human worlds. 4. what, then, does engaging with possible definitions of the museum summon into the imagination? 5. or asked in another way, what questions might those of us gathered in museum spaces ask and engage with, to think through the affordances and limitations of our semiotic technologies, and in turn, what the museum as a civic platform makes possible today. 6. Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) and Luka and Millette (2018) refer to this as a speculative commitment to thinking otherwise, critically and carefully. 7. following this invocation, we might start by asking, who or what is gathered and gathering in these spaces? who or what is being excluded and marginalised, neglected and displaced through our practices? what is our practice in the world and how do our ethics, purposes and methods align (Markham, Tiidenberg and Herman 2018)? who is doing the labour towards change in these spaces and with which privileges? 8. amidst ongoing global and local transformations, it is not unexpected that a definitive definition of the museum, and the civic positions and responsibilities “it” takes up in societies today, is currently so contested. this work is messy. 9. given this, it might be necessary to also add, who’s asking the questions and from which positionality are they performing this work? perhaps new definitions can only be made possible by first exploring these and other questions.

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**Jacina Leong**, PhD Candidate, RMIT University

# “The Radical Democratic Museum” - A Conversation about the Potentials of a New Museum Definition

By Farina Asche, Daniela Döring and Nora Sternfeld

## Abstract

What ‘is’ a museum in the 21st century? How can it be rethought in a time when right-wing populist voices are getting louder, neoliberal conditions are omnipresent and democracy is in crisis? Can we persist by claiming public and democratic spaces under the current social and economic conditions? And which possibilities for processes of democratization from inside and outside of institutions are conceivable and realizable? Questions like these shall be in the focus of our contribution, which we have set up as a conversation between Nora Sternfeld (documenta Professor in Kassel, artistic and cultural mediator), Farina Asche and Daniela Döring (doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in the fields of critical exhibition studies and museology). The starting point of our conversation is Nora Sternfeld’s new book *The Radical Democratic Museum* (2018). In the following conversation, we discuss the future of the museum as a political space – not without discussing its present and past, questioning its western perspective from a western perspective – to push for the re-definition of the museum as radically democratic and post-representational space of conflict.

**Keywords:** Critical Museum Practice, New Museology, Critique of Representation, Democratization, Participation.

## Prologue<sup>1</sup>

‘The museum is dead, long live the museum’, is stated by Nora Sternfeld in her book *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (2018: 13; *The Radical Democratic Museum*). In this collection of twelve essays, Sternfeld designs the concept of the post-representational para-museum, which responds to the multiple crises of museal representations of the past years, and actualizes them. The author assumes a paradox – namely, that struggles, which are critical of representation, are matter-of-factly shaking up the foundations of hegemonic institutions and their routines of display, but that they also run the risk of being instrumentalized by neoliberal economies and politics. To approach answers to this dilemma, Sternfeld courageously intervenes into these struggles and debates. She describes both practices of museum-making in transformation as well as an imagined museum of the future, interconnecting theoretical, reflexive and cultural historical analyses of museums with numerous examples from her own exhibition and mediation practice. Sternfeld suggests a new definition of the museum,

which has significant implications for archives, collections and exhibitions as well as approaches to memory and mediation.

In this article, which is designed as a conversation, we discuss the central theses as well as challenges and pitfalls of such a radical democratic new definition of the museum with the author herself. In this context, it is to be discussed whether ‘the’ institution persists on its hegemonic function or whether structural processes of transformation and democratization are actually possible.

## Farina Asche and Daniela Döring:

You stress that the museum has always been a politically contested place of representation and participation, thus a ‘post-representational’ space, and identify this as early as in the beginning of the museum as institution with the conquest of the Louvre during the French Revolution. Since the 20th century, the museum has been problematized as a hegemonic space, starting with demands for the democratic opening

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Friederike Landau for the translation of our article.

of museums in the 1960s, post-structuralist discussions emerging in the 1990s up to current feminist, anti-racist and queer positions. In all of these debates, the museum has been problematized as a hegemonic site where the production of visibility and recognition is permeated by social and cultural power structures. Part of this critique is that museums are paralleling and thus reinforcing the production of visibility and recognition along structures of cultural and societal power. In light of the currently diagnosed condition of political disenchantment and an economistic and neoliberally disavowing post-democracy, you consider the museum as an adequate institution and place to push for a 'democratization of democracy'? How can we imagine this process?

### **Nora Sternfeld:**

The museum, just as any other institution, in a hegemony-theoretical perspective, is a 'contested terrain', a societal context, in which hegemony is actively fought for. So, what does the term 'radical democratic' mean? While some thinkers have identified an age of post-democracy since the 1990s, describing political disenfranchisement as both the neoliberal rationalization of the public sphere and politics as well as the undermining of democratic structures via precisely this economization. In contrast, the radical democratic discourse opposes this idea of the end of politics.

Representatives of such a repoliticization and democratization of democracy are first and foremost Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose publication *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* first introduced the term 'radical democracy' (Laclau; Mouffe 1991). They refer to Claude Lefort, who is further regarded as a pioneer of radical democratic discourse, and Jacques Derrida, who describes democracy as a never-ending project, which is always only just beginning. In addition, the thinking of Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière is directed towards a democratization of democracy. Two aspects are crucial to the discourse of radical democracy: First, democracy is based on conflict and partiality, not merely on consensus and individuality; second, there is no essential or fundamental contradiction to which this conflictuality is subordinated.

Hence, when we find ourselves on contested territory; nothing has always been like it is now, and nothing must remain this way. In particular, I am referring to the writings and thinking of political theorist Oliver Marchart, whose next book *The Democratic Horizon* draws on Laclau and Mouffe to inquire about the democratization of democracy. This democracy is more egalitarian and driven by solidarity (Marchart, forthcoming 2020). Inevitably, this goes hand in hand with the realization that actually existing democracy is not at all as free, egalitarian and solidarity-centered as it presents itself to be.

So, what does that mean for the museum? It seems important to situate the function of the museum as public institution: It is neither the street of protest nor the parliament. It is however a deeply political place – let us not forget that the history of the modern museum is significantly indebted to the occupation of a museum, the taking-over of the Louvre during the French Revolution. The museum is a public institution which is related to the street as a place of protest and the parliament as a place for gathering, but it can also do more and other. A radically democratic museology takes the museum at its word and, at the same time, challenges it. Because, as a public institution, the museum belongs to everybody – which means more than being open and accessible to everyone. I would say that the museum promises the possibility to call into question who 'everybody' even is and who remains excluded from that; it allows to face the question 'what happened', to negotiate what the past means for the present and how, based on this past, we can imagine a future which is more than just the extrapolation of the present.

Nowadays, when the 'museum of the future' is repeatedly and gladly talked about as contact zone, platform, arena or space of assembly, I do not want to hollow out or water down these terms, but take them seriously and, in this sense, understand the museum of the future as radical democratic (as continuing politics). This would also mean that the conflictuality of such a space would be open for assembly and negotiation.

### **Farina and Daniela:**

Hence, a radical democratic approach aims to facilitate the partisan and conflictual negotiation of power relations, associated with questions of representation – both understood as depiction and as stand-in for political opinions. Radical democracy seeks to enable a partial and conflictual encounter with the existing relations of power. Although we find this argument compelling, it remains unconsidered that in the struggles for and against representative public spheres, actors of these struggles have different resources at their disposal. The occupation of the Louvre, for example, was primarily directed against the representational dominance of the nobility and the church. However, it was the already emerging (male-dominated) industrial and educated bourgeoisie, which succeeded in claiming this representational dominance for themselves. The opening of museum collections to the general public in the 19th century was accompanied by a closure – the division into exhibition and depot or archive – thus restructuring relations of power what to show and what to conceal. Shouldn't the concept of the post-representational museum pay closer attention to who has specific resources to engage in counter-hegemonic struggles, and how to engage in such struggles?

### **Nora:**

My book is situated in the framework of critical museology. I am explicitly placing my work in the tradition of a critical engagement with the museum, its colonial undertones and exclusions and the interrelated Western profit achieved from colonial rule and theft, its bourgeois, national narratives, orders, strategies of collection, its role in the invention of 'the nation' (Benedict Anderson), its 'voluntary self-regulation' of the people (Tony Bennett) and its patriarchic, Western 'gestures of showing' (Muttenthaler; Wonisch 2006). When I assume modern history of museums as a revolutionary history, then, this is also a history, which is deeply entangled with colonialism. Accordingly, the Louvre is not only a space of revolutionary re-appropriation, but also a place of colonial booty and 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1985/2008). In post-colonial theory, this term of epistemic violence refers to the powerful production of knowledge that appoints itself as a

universal subject of knowing and seems to appoint others as objects of knowledge. But I can only say all of this because, throughout the entire 20th century, there were social struggles that preceded, and thus enabled, the reflexive emergence of critical museology. It was those anti-colonial, feminist and anti-racist struggles that provided the base for a critique of representation in cultural studies, museology, art and theory. By being persistent and politically organized, these movements forced existing institutions of knowledge production to be more self-reflexive and self-critical. They revealed the hegemonic interest of those perspectives that make their own dominant position invisible, thus implicitly declaring it as the norm. In this respect, you both are absolutely right to raise the question of the who and how of the struggle; it is not enough to merely put museum-related emancipatory achievements into perspective – a concrete discussion of the power-related consequences of changes in museums always have to be part of the conversation as well.

### **Farina and Daniela:**

The central challenge, which repeatedly arises in your essays, is the contemporary 'alliance of critical discourses and economic concerns' (Sternfeld 2018: 17). Subsequently, the critique of representation always runs the risk of stabilizing power rather than dislocating and challenging it. You illustrate this dilemma at the example of the 'imperative of participation', which has been used within museum practice as well as interdisciplinary museum scholarship to insist on opening up and democratizing the institution. Within the field of participatory cultural mediation, you describe conflicts between neoliberal appropriation and the concurrent erosion of democratic structures on the one hand, and the emancipatory potential of participation on the other hand. The problem is that critique is being integrated without calling into question neither the relations and structures of power nor the conditions of exclusion. If at all, the institution opens up incrementally – on the level of individual and/or temporary exhibitions, but structurally, it reproduces old patterns of power. Could you explain the implications of conflict you talk about in more detail: To what extent does participation, in contrast to its own original intention, turn into a hegemonic

## Museological Review

strategy, and how can we address this dilemma?

### **Nora:**

Unfortunately, my final thoughts on examining the developments of the institution of the museum are not very enthusiastic – on the contrary. While criticism of the museum has become ever more outspoken since the rise of new museology, and some of the insights of these discourses have even partly entered into museum practice, the institutional structures of museums have by no means become more democratic. On the contrary, public museums across the globe are increasingly economized: Today, they mostly follow rationales and logics of private management. Museum budgets now are often smaller and more dependent on external funding. Simultaneously, expectations on museums rise, working conditions become more precarious, museum workers have to perform under rising pressures to succeed. It seems ironic (if not cynical) that the (semi-)privatization of institutional structures of the museum is often accompanied by the increased and staged address of ‘the public’. In exhibition announcements and the like, we often read about assemblies, platforms, contact zones, open collections and public programming. The issue of participation is a good example of the hollowing out of a democratic term: With the ‘imperative of participation’, neoliberalism has succeeded in many respects to tame and even replace democratic demands for co-determination with the empty gesture of participation. ‘Everyone’ is constantly urged to ‘participate’ – to participate in a game, whose rules are however usually not subject to debate. In this context, participation is not an emancipatory, but a hegemonically-infused institutional strategy, which Antonio Gramsci called ‘transformism’. According to Gramsci, hegemony is never achieved (only) through coercion, but always also introduced and maintained via processes of education.

‘Every relationship of hegemony’, he writes, ‘is necessarily an educational relationship.’ (Gramsci 2000: 348) Taking seriously the reform pedagogical insight that learning is not a one-way street from teacher to student, but a relationship of mutual learning, Gramsci makes it clear that hegemony also

consists in learning from the margins. Today, this learning seemingly works best when participation, evaluation and assessment take place – for example, in processes of mediating gentrification, university reforms and the general scaling-down of public institutions – when participatory strategies are employed to actually maintain the existing power relations, rather than to challenge them.

### **Farina and Daniela:**

Time and time again, under the guise of participation, participation is outsourced to independent experts and consultants instead of enabling engagement in a democratic decision-making context. Nevertheless, as you argue in your book, the museum is an intriguing space or negotiation and intervention, in which the old question of ‘everybody’ can be asked anew. We are wondering why the museum in particular is predestined to provide such a place for democratization processes, and what potential your conceptualization of the para-museum has to change museum practice? Why is the museum suitable to be a radical democratic space, in contrast to the street, the university or other public spaces?

### **Nora:**

To conceptualize the para-museum, I refer to museum and artistic practice I have been learning from for the last fifteen years. It is with their help that I could develop the idea of the para-museum. It currently seems appealing to many contemporary artists to create their own museums within existing established museum spaces. They turn the museum into a museum, far from any anti-institutionalist critique of the establishment. In contrast to the understanding of institutionalization as petrifying and depoliticizing, which was dominant in the 1970s, artists today understand institutionalization as a chance and potential. I take these strategies of artistic or creative ‘re-appropriation’ as an example to suggest the para-museum as an institution within the institution. The para-museum is an institution that calls into question the powerful functions of the museum on the basis of its own emancipatory potential, ranging from the reassessment of values to public assembly to critical education. It appropriates the museum as a museum with

its own means. In so far as the para-museum refers to the museum's potential for socio-political change and its possible engagement in emancipatory social struggles that undermine logics of domination, it is both part of the museum and part of another, newly emerging order of what a museum is. This complicated relationship, which is neither against the museum nor entirely defined by it, is captured in the prefix 'para'. The Greek prefix παρά means both 'from ... to', 'at', 'next to', 'alongside' (spatially), as well as 'during, along' (temporally). In the figurative sense, 'para' also means 'in comparison', 'in difference', 'against and against'. However, in Greek, 'para' emphasizes deviance over oppositionality, while the Latin term 'contra' underlines the more oppositional dimension of the term.

### **Farina and Daniela:**

Such a re-appropriation of changing the museum with its own means is to be identified at various institutional levels of the museum: For example, the collection of a para-museum might offer a 'reservoir of possibilities, alternatives, contradictions, relativizations and critical objections' (Sternfeld 2018: 102). It is thus fundamentally open to new interpretations and arrangements. This openness becomes more complicated in your reflections on the so-called 'object effect', in which you criticize the strict separation of subject versus object with the help of actor-network-theory (ANT). In this context, you emphasize the agency of objects. In light of the boom of the ANT, you state an averting and weakening of post-structuralist approaches and critiques. In lieu of this, you mention Derrida's reading of Marx reading, which underlines the ghostly and 'magical' moment, in which desire enters into a thing and gives it agency. With the analogy between museum object and commodity, you want to work against economization of cultural artefacts with the very means of the economy. How exactly does this process work?

### **Nora:**

In that text, I describe conflicts that are inherent in the process of the becoming of commodities. I refer to Derrida, who reads Karl Marx's understanding of commodity fetish in such a way that unfolds the magical dimension in 'the thing'. I set out to

conceptualize this ascription of desire as a violence inscribed or embedded in the object. If we assume that commodities are always results of a production of desire, and that desire is possibly intricately linked with violence, then, they could be part of the magical processes of commodity-becoming. This is how I also read the process that Walter Benjamin calls 'aura'. I think it is closely related to Benjamin's reading of Marx. We see things that turn somehow magical through a certain 'aura'. I would say that these things can be filled with that 'magic' because of the violence that is inscribed in them: violence of exploitation, violence of theft, but also violence as a means of revolutionary struggle. Hence, I ask myself to what extent and how this violence, which simultaneously inheres and conceals violence with desire, can be made productive. The materiality of things seems to be one aspect, in which things are literally objects, things that are able to object. Materiality is revealed as a reservoir for sedimented conflicts. I call this the 'power of the factual' (Sternfeld 2018: 131), which is an approach I owe very much to the reading of Walter Benjamin. Thanks to his reflections, I capture the sedimentation of conflicts in objects and explore how these conflicts can come to the fore (again).

### **Farina and Daniela:**

This is without doubt an exciting aspect of the intertwined history of museum and economy, but we are still curious to learn more about the overarching conclusions that can be drawn from bringing together economic and cultural theories – what are curators to take away from your book? Isn't it precisely the characteristic of museal collections that the various forms of violence you are talking about are made invisible and become supposedly objective or 'factual'? What is problematic about this invisibilization or objectification? On the one hand, you place emphasis on the 'power of the factual' mentioned above and on the agency of things, on the other hand, you see objects as (passive) carriers of petrified or sedimented conflicts that have to be 'kissed awake' (Sternfeld 2018: 122), implying that those objects need to be 'brought to life'. This mystifying notion of object agency reinforces those authorial narrative strategies in the museum, which present objects as passive testimonies of immutable historical facts, realities or even conflicts. Moreover, you draw attention to

the blurring lines of the subject-object-dichotomy in favor of objects' agency, however, the increasing objectification and capitalization of precarious and economically marginalized museum workers as human resources persists.

**Nora:**

I argue that there are numerous societal conflicts that can frequently be found in museums and that need to be addressed and tackled. A radical democratic museology is committed to deal with these conflicts. Curatorially speaking, this means that conflictuality needs to be acknowledged and that spaces need to be created, in which these conflicts can be negotiated – spaces, in which power relations shall be challenged and transformed.

**Farina and Daniela:**

The greatest potential and thematic focus of your book lies in the analysis of cultural mediation as theory and practice with the aim of radicalizing it. Mediation – just as the critique of representation per se – faces a dilemma: It is both an affirmative component of economizing education and attempting to propose a critique to that economization. You understand cultural mediation not only as a form of governance that legitimizes political hegemony but precisely as a demand to politicize this contradiction. Instead of rejecting forms of mediation as governmental attempts at reconciliation per se and the maintenance of hegemonic rule, you are concerned with finding or reinventing practices of mediation that can make existing truths debatable again, or provoke other forms of knowledge. The moment of radicality, as we understand you, then does not lie in the mediation of ready-made truths, but in the collective negotiation of unexpected knowledge in the cultural mediation process.

Based on the examples from your own mediation practice, it becomes wonderfully clear how this could work. For example, you have described the post-representational representation practices of office trafo.K – the Vienna-based collective for cultural mediation and critical knowledge production which you are part of – which strives to work with other (i.e., queer, activist and artistic) images rather than with

(hetero-)normative practices of (visual) representation. While this approach is plausible for mediation, for us, it remains debatable to what extent this mediation practice is transferable to other areas and practices within the museum, especially the management of exhibitions and collections. It seems that concrete examples of radical cultural mediation are generalized all too quickly to be applicable for 'the museum' per se. After all, in the museum, we are dealing mostly with normative images that are incomparably more difficult to compare with each other because of their specific embeddedness in most different systems of representation (e.g., the authority of the institution, the supposed neutrality of narration, objectifying approaches to display, etc.). How exactly can the radical moment of openness and the unexpected be realized in practices of collecting and exhibiting? After all, and despite all openness of reception, the act of curating is always also a process of limiting and fixing meanings and interpretations.

**Nora:**

Yes. Every curatorial action and choice require us to take a stance; they are nested within political circumstances. Curating is therefore not neutral, whether this is disclosed or not. At the same time, however, curatorial practice also cannot completely define, determine or control its own reception. Curating can thus turn out to be received quite differently from what was intended. Here, the curatorial moment opens up a space for debate and reflection. This space is the space of the agency of museum education.

**Farina and Daniela:**

In the last chapter of your book, an essay called 'Why exhibit at all?', you create an almost post-apocalyptic utopia. You project ahead into the year 2030, imagining a political, authoritarian-fascist turn to the Right, in which you and a collective of artists, activists, researchers and dissidents will live in a museum that you have occupied and taken over. In this context, you have developed an exhibition about the representational struggles of the last years from 2013 to 2023 in museums, art academies and other cultural institutions that are critical of representation. For this exhibition about practices of

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exhibiting, you gather snapshots from arts activism, funding programs and work from artist collectives, and let us readers gain insight into the processes of writing and creating this exhibition. In this context, too, you are concerned with the question of whether the numerous anti-racist, feminist and post-colonial struggles, which have problematized the history of violence, the dominance of certain cultures, the multiple exclusions and inequalities in museums, are or are not part of the capitalization of critique, and thus legitimize rather than challenges structures of power. You do not embrace this paradox, which you weave through the whole book, with the prospect of a 'happy end' or the promise of ever being able to resolve it. Rather, you demonstrate the contradictions of the struggles for a 'different' culture of exhibition and, at the same time, demonstrate how we might not resign in the face of these contradictions, but would rather actively counter them. However, the way in which the designed exhibition is imagined remains quite conventional. As researchers, we are interested in the transformation of exhibition practices and are particularly concerned with other and new implications of strategies of collecting and exhibiting. What does such a meta-exhibition really show beyond historical documents and digital material, and how does it proceed? What could exhibition texts in the museum space look like, how could they go beyond objectifying narratives? Can we exhibit activism, conflict and negotiation without shutting them down? Can these issues be fed into conventional frameworks of exhibition and representation at all, or do we have to imagine a radically different way of thinking exhibitions?

### **Nora:**

The last text of the book flees into the future. Perhaps, I am choosing to do that because I am concerned about the consequences of a Midas logic of any new perspectivation in the present – that is a logic of value exploitation, running risk of wanting to turn everything into value. According to this logic, any experiment can fall prey to the neoliberal void – however immersive this void may be. Accordingly, my outlook on the future entails that one does not merely aim at establishing other practices of representation, but is invested to think of them, above all, in connection with other anti-discriminatory

structures. I am increasingly concerned with the question of how institutions could be organized differently, how we can finally learn to stop thinking critically and continue to act uncritically. There are two institutions that provide good examples for me, who not only want the impossible, but also implement that in their everyday museum practice and structure: First, the Museum of Impossible Forms in Helsinki, a self-organized meeting and exhibition space in eastern Helsinki, and the Volkskundemuseum Wien (Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art), which considers itself as a platform for interaction with other scientific disciplines and fields of art, as open space for research and the negotiation of social discourses. In both institutions, experiments are developed to collectively negotiate, shape and change hegemonic cultural structures, ranging from improving working conditions and budgets to programming. Laurence Rassel, Director of the Brussels-based Ecole de recherche graphique (ERG), is trying to implement exactly this for her Art School. She conceptualizes 'open source institutions' as strategies towards communing, to open institutional infrastructures and spaces – especially the archive – to communities (Rassel 2019: 159).

### **Farina and Daniela:**

In your book, you ask: Can the museal 'house of the oppressor' (Sternfeld 2018: 171) be rebuilt from the inside out, or does it require a completely new construction? In a world in which there is no longer an oppositional outside, you plead for the sparking of new collective movements who move through, along, across and in the middle of existing institutions and their respective tools and techniques, and will challenge and co-design them all. Such a para-museum – this is your hypothesis – will question and rethink the museum institution as a Western concept. It will re-narrate the museum as a place for dealing with (violent) legacies, as a physical space for contemporary counter-narration and as part of an order that is always becoming. Your proposition is reminiscent of the three episodes of artistic institutional critique since the 1960s, in the course of which critique shifted from the outside of institutions into its very inside to transform the latter from within. Artworks that were once critical of representational practices of museums have by now been integrated and



canonized into collections of those very institutions, that were once at the center of critique. Whether institutional critique can develop a critical potential at all, or whether it rather contributes to the consolidation and legitimation of the museum has been subject to debate ever since. For example, there are currently requests that keep pushing for making the everyday operations of museum institutions more transparent, asking for reflexive and (self-)critical techniques of exhibition-making to give insights into conditions behind the scenes.

If institutions make institutional self-criticism part of their (own) programme, of course, the power of definition about what and how something is displayed and made accessible certainly remains within the power of the museums themselves. At the same time, it becomes an opportunity for the museum to present itself as an institution that is dynamic, transparent, learning and (self-)critical. How would you respond to this question you had raised yourself today? Can the strategies you proposed lead to a real democratization of institutional structures of the museum? How can we see, identify or verify this change? When would your request for the 'democratization of democracy' in the museum and beyond be ultimately achieved?

### **Nora:**

The next book in the series on curating, which I co-edited together with Beatrice Jaschke and Matthias Beitzl, is entitled *Organizing Counter-Publics. Critical Management in Curating* (Beitzl, Jaschke, Sternfeld 2019). In the context of this volume, we inquire about structures and forms of organization that are guided not by economic but by democratic principles. We ask: How do we want to work? And how can museums and exhibitions be organized differently? Certainly, even after years of collectively thinking about these questions, we cannot provide one conclusive answer to these questions. The 'democratization of democracy' brings up claims that may never be achieved. But it has become increasingly clear to us that the impossibility to achieve these claims must always be thought of, and be practiced in connection with questions of institutional change, public spheres and future-oriented forms

of organization.

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## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

Through collection, conservation, research, exhibitions, and public programming, museums democratize access to knowledge; safeguard diverse histories and perspectives; and serve to inform, enrich, and empower communities. Through fostering opportunities for visitors to engage in dialogue with both past and future, museums are educational spaces that facilitate active civic participation in the present.

**Emily Olsen**, Independent Arts Administrator, MA in Visual Arts Administration, New York University

The definition of a museum has created points of contention because it is always evolving. Growing out of cabinets of curiosities, museums previously existed as aristocratic, conservative, and unrelatable institutions which were simply collecting, preserving and displaying artifacts. Many visitors perceived museums to be unapproachable and only representative of one voice, one viewpoint, and one culture. In the 21st century, museums are multi-dimensional and multi-voiced, which shifts power to the visitors and the people who are wanting to see themselves reflected in the collections and exhibitions. Museums have failed to truly be accessible if visitors cannot relate their individual stories and experiences to the institutions they visit.

Museums have turned into democratic and participatory spaces which goes beyond the traditional display of artifacts. As non-profits, museums should be existing for the people and strive to authentically represent the communities around them. To more completely play a role in society, museums now offer extensions of accessibility in the forms of programming and projects. Programs can be outreach to local school groups, free or reduced admission to lectures or special tours, a behind-the-scenes look at the collection, or new and interactive exhibitions. The visitor experience is crucial to ensure that the institution is working to authentically serve every person who walks through the door. Museums should be asking the visitor what they want to get out their experience and how they can be better served, while still upholding a level of preservation of the collection. It is an extremely delicate balance, but it cannot be denied that museums have come a long way.

**Emily Kraft**, Administrative & Visitor Engagement Coordinator at the Seward House Museum, Auburn

Museums are or strive to be for everybody and by everybody. They tell the story of our world past, present and perhaps future, respectfully, honestly and critically, educating and developing understanding through participation in their collections and mission. They ensure that the physical, digital and conceptual evidence of our collective past and general existence is preserved, safeguarded for, and shared with the future, both in terms of the conservation and continued public sharing of collections and a focus on macro social, economic and environmental concerns.

**Jennifer Paton**, Site Assistant & Visitor Experience Team Member, YMT

# Representations of Socialist Democracy in China's Museums

By Lanzhou Luo

## Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party proposes an alternative 'socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics'. The socialist democracy has inherited and amplified populist rather than institutional meanings of democracy to contextualize the universal concept. In 2012, the Party started to promote the twelve 'core socialist values' and democracy ranks second on the list. President Xi Jinping further sets 'Chinese splendid traditional culture' and 'revolutionary culture' as the foundation of the core values. Museums of cultural relics and of revolutionary history thus find their positions in publicizing these values. Meanings of democracy and its relationship with museum collections become less important than perfecting means for propaganda. While the state expects museums to enjoin and cultivate public recognition of socialist values, museum professionals benchmark their performance according to advanced western museum practices which originally grow in and contribute to the liberal democracy. The understandings of the western model as an advanced standard further dissolve in constructing a new system.

**Keywords:** Socialist Democracy, China's Museums, Core Socialist Values

Liberal democracy has long been tied to the Western model. It is based on electoral and representative institutions and guaranteed by full protection of civil and political liberties, the rule of law, and judicial independence. Such democracy is supposed to be the best and only model; however, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) proposes an alternative: 'socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics' (具有中国特色的社会主义民主). Chinese discourses have already widely adopted the terminology of democracy, no matter whether its meaning is consistent with the Western model. In discourses among Western scholars, Suzanne Ogden (2002) calls for contextualising universal concepts like democracy as well as for the process and achievements of democracy to be judged by Chinese-specific standards. Brantly Womack (2005) contends that Chinese-style democracy is theoretically possible, while Sor-Hoon Tan (2011) points out that offering a model of American democracy to the Chinese would most probably be ignored. Yijiang Ding (2001) notices that the economy became more liberalised in the 1980s, which gave rise to the rethinking of democracy.

The International Council of Museums (2019) proposed a new museum definition, introducing political terminology like democratising to highlight how museums reflect and

interact with society. Since the concept of democracy needs to be contextualised in China's case, it is not possible to discuss museum representation of democracy in China without its specific context. This paper does not intend to judge the performance of museums in China in representing democracy. Instead, it will address museums' roles in constructing Chinese-style democracy as well as how museums form a mechanism to cope with democratisation as a political order and articulate their vision within this setting. The process of democratising starts with the reform of decision-making within the museum. Democratic centralism, a detailed implementation of the general system at the museum management level, serves as an effort to ensure Chinese democracy while representing different parties within the museum. In the course of engaging with different voices in the internal management, museum exhibitions and education programs claim to join President Xi's hand in building a unified and prosperous populist image. Under such a claim, museums have the chance to add new concepts and expand definitions of socialist democracy.

## Reflecting of Democratic Centralism in Management

The CCP established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and designed its politics as two types: the 'state form' (国体), referring to the class nature of the state; and the

'political form' (政体), referring to the governmental system of democratic centralism (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Democratic centralism asks for the government to better represent the people while maintaining a high level of commitment to the CCP. Several political movements, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, have redefined who belonged to the class that ruled the country and have dramatically changed the tendency from democracy to centralism (Howland, 2017). The CCP's dictatorship was communicated to the public through highlighting class struggles. Exhibition halls for class education were thus established nationwide. The ironies of this endeavour abound. On the one hand, museum staff curated didactic exhibitions arousing the emotions of the masses and made the visits ritualistic through docent-led tours (Ho, 2018: 212). On the other hand, the exhibitions evoked the people to overthrow the class which were the one most of the museum staff belonged to. The didactic characteristic of the exhibitions fit the CCP's agenda of upgrading class struggles to moral judgement. As Lynn White (1999) argues that the official support for designated bosses and monitors with good class labels raised individuals' dependence on particular leaders in units where they worked or studied; individuals with bad class labels revolted against the authority when social control was loosened. In such a hierarchy, the debate on the class labels became extremely important, not in a way of creating a space for critical dialogues but individuals actively seeking ways to prove themselves as members of the good class, the proletariat, and categorized those they did not like into bad class.

Museums helped build the perfect and pure moral image of the proletariat. Local officials gave direct orders to museums that 'true stories and characters were not necessary' as long as the image could be delivered (Chen, 1999: 59). They joined artists to create the Rent Collection Courtyard (收租院), a typical case of museums convincing the audience to see exaggerated art as facts, which later received nationwide attention when exhibited at the National Art Gallery and the Palace Museum and became a model for exhibitions at local levels. The leading academic journal *Art Magazine* reported

the creation of this artwork and its reception by the art world when this joint sculpture was on display in 1965. Although the creators repeatedly emphasised collective wisdom, they admitted a core leadership group to unify thoughts among all the participants. The unified thoughts were accomplished through 'politics in command and promoting democracy' (政治挂帅, 发扬民主) and the creators seldom described the core leadership group publicly (To unify thoughts and to develop methods: several questions regarding collective creating answered by the artists of Rent Collection House, 1965). However, though many these publications imagined an environment encouraging artists from different backgrounds—both academics and folk people, senior experts and novices—contributing to the artwork equally, it is interesting to see that a core group held more power over the other members of this creative team. This core group made the decisions to approve or deny different ideas and gave orders for the others to follow.

Even the dramatic political movements barely changed the hierarchy within the museum. The only difference was that people from different factions fought for a higher position within this hierarchy. The political movements calmed after 1978, when the CCP turned its interest towards economic development, which brought liberal ideals. But even at the height of the democracy movement in 1989, an institutional definition of democracy that required the selection of political leaders via competitive elections did not seem to be what most Chinese had in mind (Perry, 2015). Both official and public discourses called for a stronger government that better represented the people. Compared to the previous political movements aimed at destroying the governing system and leading to nationwide chaos through struggles between different fractions in the early years of the PRC, the democracy movement in 1989 seemed to agree on government control. Under such circumstances, museum researchers proposed a reform plan, which seemed less radical than the existing one born to fit the previous political movements. Instead of creating an impression of involving people from all backgrounds, democratising the process of decision-making towards democratic centralism meant the sharing of power

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stayed within the museum professional circles, or less satisfyingly, within the top leadership of a museum.

The decision-making process was further standardised by introducing the council system into museum management. Since 2008, the state has stressed social engagement in museums and urged museums to redefine their relationship with the government. In 2012, the state further refined the management system within the museums, requiring museums to report the portion of the CCP's leaders within the board of trustees (Song, 2014). The CCP's intention for promoting this new management system seems to be that it enables the party to reassert its control over cultural institutions, which indicates the current situation may cause the party feeling less control. On the contrary to the general understandings that promoting a comparatively democratic system means the authorities distributing their powers, the CCP facilitating the democratic centralism within the museums can lead to control at the micro-level. With the decision-making process being standardised, the negotiation room left within the gaps between the policies and implementation becomes less. The CCP remains at the top of the system. In the professional areas left outside the decision-making process, the state asserts power through giving approval to evaluation standards and engaging leading experts in the museum field in shaping these standards. In a small scale, different opinions from experts can be heard. Several scholars advocate for adding visitors' aspect to the evaluation, which has been approbated and publicized through the CCP's newspaper (Wei, 2015; Zheng, 2016; Qu, 2018; Feng, 2019). Democratic centralism thus reaches the public at the bottom of the hierarchy.

From museums' perspectives, however, democratising as an administrative order will certainly not determine how democratic a museum can be. Under the system of reporting the portion of CCP leaders within the boards of trustees, the museum field has different perspectives. Museums struggle for autonomy within the allowed framework (Wang, 2018). To ensure the council system is democratic, museums propose including representatives from various areas such as government departments, museum management, museum

staff, universities and museum visitors (Cai & Fu, 2017; Wang, 2019). It is also proposing to involve more than two government departments (Cai & Fu, 2017). In other words, the proposal refers to the total amount of government representatives remaining unchanged while these representatives should come from different departments. It is hard to get representatives from different departments of the government to agree on every resolution and thus makes it difficult for the government to exert much control in the decision-making process. With the overall proportion unchanged, museums can still be considered as 'following' the orders. Apart from the representatives from the government, museums also propose elections in appointing the representatives from other parties (Chen, 2016). Through transforming the administrative orders and including elections in the process, museums create new aspects of democracy within the party's frame.

Museums also notice the tensions of power distribution between the museum management and the board. The museum management consists of the director appointed by the government and the department heads appointed by the director, while the board occupies a much lower administrative level than the museum management. In other words, the board does not have equal power to restrain the museum management and thus it is questionable whether decisions made by the board can actually influence the museum's operations (Luo, 2018). From policies to implementation, museums still have room to negotiate for their version of democracy.

## Imaging a Populist Dream

A growing number of researchers in both Chinese and Western academia have recognised the political agenda of museums. Simon Knell (2016) views museums as nation-making institutions. In reviewing local museums in Radostina Sharenkova's Bulgaria, he argued that 'one of the problems of "fact-based" narrative-driven exhibitions is that there simply is no division between propaganda and the supposedly objective narrative' (Knell, 2010: 45-46). The communist powers manipulated the narratives to offer evidence demonstrating social improvements that had arrived with communism.

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Moreover, Knell (2010) points out that museums ideologically shaping things through narrative is not limited to museums under dictator-led communist regimes. The British Museum, for example, 'used the moral elevation of Enlightenment universalism to depoliticise and denationalise world culture, and legitimise the museum's continued possession of contested pieces' (Knell, 2010: 46). Taking a similar stand of not criticising the political aspects of museums, Yan Liu (2018) intends to replace the term propaganda with political communication to neutralise the negative meanings of the former terminology. Chinese contexts become a new field to implement and expand the two concepts originated from the English scholarship.

Museums in China never disguise their political missions. They, by definition, shoulder the responsibilities of 'increasing political awareness among the people' (Shen, 1951: 10). Since the founding of the PRC, the two types of museums, museums of cultural relics and of revolutionary history, have set their missions from a populist perspective. The State Ministry of Culture set a goal for Chinese history museums to display 'Chinese history through cultural relics with a view of Marxism' (Li, 2012: 143). The goal was to have the leading museums of this type in the world rather than following after the Soviet model. The deputy director of the National Museum of China described the exhibition of national history through cultural relics as 'very rare in the world, not in the Louvre, not in the British Museum, and a little similar to the exhibitions at the National Museum of American History' (Li, 2012: 143). In addition to the direct way which the museum of revolutionary history delivers propaganda, politics plays a more subtle yet influential role in those areas claiming independence from politics. These are the areas where the authorities use their power to make the public believe what authorities classify and redefine as objective facts, and the process of classification redefinition may include more people to create an image of empowering the public.

Museums in China feel obliged to follow state orders. In 2012, the CCP started to promote the twelve 'core socialist values' (社会主义核心价值观) and democracy ranked second on the

list (Hu, 2012: 31-32). President Xi Jinping (2017) further set 'Chinese splendid traditional culture' (中华优秀传统文化) and 'revolutionary culture' (革命文化) as the foundation of the core values, and these values, in turn, serve as cultural development directions. Observers like Elizabeth Perry (2015) point out that in both official discourse and among Chinese citizens, this populist perspective of democracy sets the goal not to restrain government but to empower it through the active political participation of the citizenry. The claim of the core socialist values thus gives both types of museums a political mission in the current society. As mostly state-funded institutions, museums in China contribute to this perspective, ensuring public engagement in building a strong nation with a splendid past, present and future. Museums find their missions in publicizing core socialist values based on the party's claim that democracy is among the people's common values. As the CCP decides the people's needs, museums in China define what their visitors want. 'Whether an individual identifies with the core socialist values determines whether one can fully develop' (Zhou, 2018). This is the foundation for museums to fulfil their educational function, and it is not surprising to see museums popularise the party's orders for the sake of an individual's well-being. Even the diversification of values is viewed as deviation from the standard of being a 'fully-developed' individual and thus cultivating the core socialist values enters the national curriculum of moral education (Guo, 2017). The core socialist values serve as moral judgement. If institutions like museums ensure active political participation on the part of the citizenry, the party and its government can ensure better representation of the people. In turn, political messages from the party can better address the people's needs. It becomes less important to prove whether publicity makes the party-defined values commonplace or to discover the other needs of individuals outside the definitions from the party. These other needs of individuals serve as evidence that these individuals are not 'fully developed'. The party and the institutions it funded like museums together construct an impeccable system. In the system, the evidences are carefully selected according to the pre-defined conclusion and succession policies are carried out according to the proven conclusion, which generates new

evidences to prove the conclusion.

The splendid traditional Chinese culture extends across the timeline of the populist dream. When a museum tries to connect its ancient collections with the contemporary visitors, it narrates 'the development process of Chinese splendid traditional culture has consistently reflect the understanding and pursuit of core values by the Chinese people, and is an important nourishment of contemporary society's attention to core values' (Zhao, 2019: 113). Museum researchers have sought to find the origin of democracy in Chinese traditional philosophy. They trace the Chinese translation of democracy, 民主, back to thousands of years ago (Zhao, 2019). They seem to neglect the fact that it is the modern version of democracy introduced into China by the Westerners stimulated the local translators to borrow the existing terms in Chinese classics. In fact, the party specifically acknowledges that democracy is an imported concept and the definitions of democracy in Chinese words 民主 are 'completely different from the ones in Chinese classics' (Shi, 2015: 17). However, the contradiction regarding democracy does not prevent core socialist values from claiming to be rooted in Chinese traditional culture; rather, it is just a way for museums to promote a unified view of history. For example, every year since 2015 the 100 exhibitions nominated by the State Cultural Relics Bureau for 'Promoting Chinese Splendid Traditional Culture and Cultivating Core Socialist Values' have demonstrated ancient artefacts, highlighted China's dominating position in Asia in ancient times, and illustrated a Chinese modernization process led by the CCP (Xin, 2019). These exhibitions are barely concerned with explaining the connections between Chinese tradition and core values or the meaning of the values the exhibitions intend to exhibit. All the exhibitions reflect a common vision of a strong nation with a glorious past.

On the tenth anniversary of the PRC in 1959, both the Museum of the Chinese Revolutionary (as a national model) and museums of Chinese revolutionary history at the local level were established to legitimise the CCP's rule. To accomplish this, they carefully re-created, through exhibitions, a desirable image of the party that would impress the public and highlight the pivotal role that the founding father, Mao Zedong, played

in guiding the party to its final victory (Hung, 2011: 117). Likewise, by reasserting revolutionary culture, President Xi shows the people that the current happy lives they live in and achievements the state have achieved are the results of the party's leadership.

Museums justify the relationship between the revolutionary culture and the core socialist values. The party provided direction and developed theories, which led to practices. Results of the practices became revolutionary collections in museums over time. These objective collections thus serve as proof of how correct the party has always been (Zhu, 2017). It, again, provides a closed loop in which the elements testify for each other. This link also seems to be broad and can be applied to any political message rather than being limited to the core socialist values. Museums of revolutionary history once engaged in politics; however, with the dramatic changes in political conditions from the 1950s to the 1970s, exhibitions were constantly cancelled for not keeping up with the changing needs, which led to the closing of many museums of this kind. The Shanxi Provincial Museum of Revolutionary History, for instance, was officially set up in 1960 as an extension of the exhibition celebrating the tenth anniversary of the PRC (Preparatory Office of the Shanxi Provincial Museum of Revolutionary History, 1961). This museum opened with prosperity but closed within a few years. In its few years of operation, the only photo exhibition that the museum managed to create was cancelled because the Cultural Bureau thought 'the exhibition could not catch up with the changing needs of class struggles' (Party Committee at the Shanxi Provincial Museum of Revolutionary History, 1965). The changing political conditions did not wait for the museum to figure out its position but rather asked it to hand over its collections to other cultural institutions (Preparatory Office of the Shanxi Provincial Museum of Revolutionary History, 1965). Thus, the surviving museums with revolutionary collections have developed a strategy of fulfilling their political mission through avoiding detailed discussions of political terms raised by the party. Museums of revolutionary history thus serve as places where education for the future generations happens and dictatorship of the party

delivers.

### **Expanding Definitions of Democracy under Chinese Socialism**

The CCP's orders of consistency a Marxist view of history with Chinese characteristics (as determined by the party) set the theoretical basis for museum research in China. The theoretical basis can be perceived as the only perspective through the process of unification promoted by both the party and the institutions like museums. If museums are viewed as neutral and universal tools, then it becomes easier to create academic ideas for how to perfect them. On the one hand, museum practices are removed from their original context. The contradictory logic has reached a forced harmony that the efforts to ensure liberal democracy have been introduced to build the Chinese populist dream. If socialist democracy is one of the core values in China, liberal democracy is the Western version. In countries like the United States, museums engage the public and introduce education programs to cultivate participation in voting in elections. In Asian nations like South Korea, museums serve as places for connecting with traditional culture and educating for patriotism (Liu & Han, 2015; Rao & He, 2016). These neutral tools for perfecting the Western core values can also apply with the museums in China. From this perspective, democratising museums can be another way to achieve better propaganda goals.

On the other hand, by not touching the title of socialist democracy, part of the museum field adds more concepts. Xu (2018) recognises the economic boom since the 1980s as a foundation for cultural resources like museums entering the market. Museums shoulder more responsibilities to maintain certain standards in order not to be abused by the popular culture while at the same time to increase participation in order to facilitate cultural communication between social groups (Xu, 2018). New types of museums emerge other than museums of cultural relics and of revolutionary history, which gives rise to the discussions of new museums' missions in the contemporary situation. For instance, the vision of folk museums is pictured as 'museums facilitating democratic dialogues' (Hu, 2018: 11). Folk museums exist to serve local residents rather than administrations or authorities, which

challenges the provincial museums of cultural relics born to contribute to a unified national story eliminating local characteristics (Hu, 2018: 7-8, 11). However, these visions are conveniently borrowed from liberal democracy, which is rooted in practices from different societies or cultures. Even Hu admits that 'most of the public museums in China cannot achieve this goal' (2018: 11).

Some scholars see the administrative gaps between different institutions and make use of it to bring theoretically liberal democracy into Chinese practices. Scholars like Wang Huangsheng promote an idea of 'new art gallery studies' (新美术馆学). Wang occupies both an academic position as a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and an administrative position as the director of the Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He is an example of articulating ideas within the party's system. His idea is based on the fact that the administrative systems of art galleries are different from that of the museums of cultural relics and revolutionary history. The new art gallery studies view art galleries as part of social democratising. Democracy here differs from the definitions discussed above. The need of art galleries in promoting democracy, instead of creating a unified view in line with the party, is to provide 'the public with freedom and choices' (Wang & Shen, 2018: 122). The recognition of such need is based on the awareness of a multifaceted society rather than a denial of multiple needs (Wang & Zhao, 2015: 22). The responsibilities of art galleries are described as 'encouraging and cultivating individuals' self-awareness and perception' (Wang & Shen, 2018: 122). The new art galleries studies also made the definition of individuals more inclusive. It involves not only the 'objects of education' (the public) but also the creators/artists (Wang & Shen, 2018: 123). The evaluation standard of personal well-being, rather than the perception of democracy as the core socialist value, is set as 'becoming a person pursuing freedom and democracy' (Wang & Shen, 2018: 122). The theoretical basis of the evaluation concerns the awareness of the powers of the art galleries and its relationship with the public. Wang further introduces a concept of 'democratising culture' as the social role for art galleries (Wang, 2015: 9; Wang, 2016). The



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process of democratising culture requires art galleries to share authorities of interpretation with the public; a new structure of power indicating the relationship between the public and the museum will be born within this process of negotiating powers (Wang, 2016).

The redefining of democracy in the new art galleries studies does not stay in the theoretical field. With Wang Huangsheng's support, the Biennial held by the Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2016 was titled as 'Negotiating Space' (Huang, 2016). This exhibition questioned the targeting by institutionalised art galleries of a curators' position in organizing an exhibition (Wang & Shen, 2018: 122). The exhibition experimented with a new system of viewing gallery staff as 'coordinators' (Huang, 2016). Some criticism emphasised that the title, whether curators or coordinators, is not as important as raising awareness of the powers held by the curators in decision-making and language of both art and interpretation, as well as awareness of their 'sacred status' in both the public and academia (Ye, 2017: 59). In other words, the purpose of this experiment was not to eliminate the museum's interpretation of art, but to improve the process of forming the interpretation. An exhibition will eventually present the results of such negotiation and thus the evaluation criteria of exhibitions may go back to the representations of different social groups. From an evaluation perspective, the concern here is that the museum may return to the process similar to the creation of the Rent Collection Courtyard, creating an apparently diversified curatorial group in order to meet these criteria. The evaluation criteria do not necessarily change the nature of an exhibition but questioning the democratisation of the curatorial process will promote new and long-term reforms.

### Conclusion

When talking in general about museums as democratising spaces for critical dialogue, it can easily be linked to empowering the public. In the Chinese context, it can mistakenly lead to concern about returning to the times when museums became stages for political struggles and survived only through criticising themselves. Different factions used

protection or destruction of cultural relics as excuses for acquiring political benefits and manipulated the facts to better serve their needs for propaganda. Being critical turned into political means against each other causing serious consequences upon individuals. As a result, museums in China do not own the high place of trustworthy as those in the Western culture. Through joining in the party's populist idea of democracy, museums in China want to create a flawless image of the nation regaining their authority. The populist idea and the flawless image seems to support each other and create a system. In this system, democracy from the populist idea can easily become moral judgement and questioning the image will be morally wrong; the image remaining flawless can in turn becomes evidence for further propagating the populist idea. The concept of museums as spaces for critical dialogue ambiguously becomes places for public receiving didactic education. The standards for the moral judgement are defined by a small group of scholars nominated by the CCP and the public passively accept these standards.

However, once the public is included in the flawless image that museums portray through exhibitions and claim it as 'fact', it loses control of different opinions raised by visitors based on their life experiences outside the museum, no matter how hard the museum and the party together tell the visitors what their needs are. In addition, once the notion of democracy is raised, researchers cannot ignore the liberal meanings and the Western notions. In order to integrate the liberal meanings into the socialist version, museums are making progress at a small scale, either in the area of nominating board members through election within the museum or of including public opinions into the operational process like curatorship. However, the experiment of including the public in the curatorial process happens in art museums where the interpretations can be indirect and may be detached from real life. When it comes to the types of museums related to the interpretation of history or folk life, the reform becomes much more conservative. The liberalised economy in the 1980s and dissolution of the Soviet Union gave rise to the dispute between capitalist and socialist ideologies. The debates were entangled with fresh traumatised memories towards the bloody political movements from

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the 1950s to the 1970s. Reflections on the nation's history easily embraced the liberal democracy as the only correct standard and has dominated the intellectual world. Ironically, the methods introduced to distinguish ideas were similar to what were taught in the class education. Leftists becomes a terminology where supporters of Mao's China gathered with nostalgia of the past while Rightists constantly use the words like democracy, freedom, and enlightenment serving as high praise of the American model. Liberal democracy has been mostly an imagined concept in Chinese discourses without detailed deconstructing its meanings. However, the world is changing. The new generation born after China opening up to the world has witnessed the country and their lives more and more prosperous in dramatic economic changes. Growth of personal wealth provides them with more opportunities to experience another model, choosing to live in another country or not. Radical methods of engaging in political and social movements have faded away from their education. Besides, western countries have their own social problems. The world is not united after the United States winning the Cold War. The re-affirmation of socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics in the 21st century reflects such trend. The focus is shifting from criticizing a system for not being capitalist or socialist enough to constructing a new system which can win support from its people, gain power to speak up in the old world dominated by the west, or even receive followers. The new art gallery studies thus need more exploration in such contexts.

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## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

According to one estimate, there are 55,000 museums around the world. Each one is a complex wonderland. Museums have historically gathered, organized, and displayed the world as conveyed through objects, material evidence of natural or man-made phenomenon. Museums can be large or small, public or private, and speak to enlightening, democratic, ideals that engender sympathy towards the planet and the humans that occupy it, or more cynically elevate particular types of social control and dubious truths presented through ideological means. Simply stated: because there are so many museums with so many different complex histories; it becomes difficult to offer clear cut definitions of what a museum is or is not. Despite suggesting historical continuity, some museums occupy centuries-old buildings and hold objects created or uncovered long ago, museums and other cultural institutions still remain bound to the ongoing evolution of the societies surrounding them.

What is clear is that while their roles may be evolving, museums remain trusted and valued sources of information in many western societies. In the United States, more people visit museums each year than sporting events and theme parks combined. Major museums on both coasts have recently expanded. New museums open annually. And yet, museums face challenges related to declining public financial support, vigorous attacks on science including climate change denial, and changing visitor needs. Museums now occupy spaces both physical and digital. While precarious financial positions discourage some museums from taking risks, their survival depends on their continually seeking renewed relevance in a changing world.

While museums can and will continue to move forward, they will never be fully disentangled from their sometimes dark histories. As a historian studying museums, I argue that by better knowing these stories, we can work to know where cultural institutions come from and where they might be going.

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A museum's primary role in society is to preserve and protect history through its collections. Exhibits, education, and outreach all play an important role in disseminating information to the public, but they are only made possible through the museum's collections. Museums preserve history to ensure it is not lost over time and can continue to help advance society's knowledge as a whole. However, collections should not just be viewed as preserving the past, but also as actively working to preserve the present. The museums role in society is to continue collecting to ensure the most complete record possible.

The role of the museum is starting to change in that digitization is making it possible for museums to reach a much larger segment of the population. With digitization, museums have the ability to pull their collections out of the shadows and show people the wonders that they hold. A museum's evolving role is to provide greater access to their collection and encourage people to take advantage of the vast resources at their disposal.

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# ‘Shouts of Korean’: Review of the Newly Opened Exhibition in the Independence Hall of Korea, and the Emotional Role of Museums with Difficult History

By Minju Oh

## Abstract

This paper investigates and critiques a recently opened exhibition at Independence Hall of Korea as a case study to reflect on a social role of museum within current affairs related to difficult history particularly. South Korea is still attempting to come to terms with the Japanese colonial occupation. The year 2019 celebrated the 100th anniversary of ‘March First Independence Movement’, which is considered the biggest independence movement in Korea, having significant implication to current and future Korean through its spirit. Therefore, for celebrating it, the Independence Hall opened a new exhibition on 1st March, 2019 and presented photographs of the independence movement; staged exhibition about the horrendous crimes and torture committed by the Japanese to Korean people using photographs and oral history videos; pledge of the independence movement with high technology display techniques; and voices of Korean people where visitors can hear them shouting “Long live Korean independence!” and “Hurray Korea!”. Through this exhibition, the museum aims to add to current conversations in terms of the social and political conflicts between South Korea and Japanese and imagine better future of society as a social agent by helping people experience and feel the spirit of the ‘March First Independence Movement’, Korean people’s pursuit of the universal values of freedom and peace, and reflect on the meaning of it and world peace today (Independence Hall of Korea, 2019). Emotion is the key of this social role of museum and its potential social impact particularly in terms of difficult history. This is because emotions, that visitors feel and express in the process of experiencing, affect how historical narrative within museums is understood and, in turn, how a person makes sense of their moral framework towards the present and the future based on it (Watson, 2015). Hence, this paper makes argument based on the analysis of the case study of how museums play their social role that offers a space of critical dialogues about the presents and the futures by developing themselves not only into reflecting and interacting with society but also inspiring and eliciting visitor emotional response related to difficult history.

**Keywords:** Social Role of Museum, Social Agent, Emotion, Difficult History, Contemporary Conflicts

The subject of emotion has been recently emphasised within the academic disciplines of heritage and museum studies, as a number of scholars have explored emotion as the key to understanding what museums are doing and how visitors experience the past and historical narratives or memories. For instance, in relation to empathy for others in the past (Smith, 2011; Witcomb, 2015), the establishment of people’s moral framework through their emotional engagement (Watson, 2015), the meditation on difficult histories (Crooke, 2016), and in relation to themes of social justice and global equality (Tolia-Kelly, 2016).

can be influenced and mediated by the social and cultural context (Watson, 2015; 2016). This is because, as Smith (2006) stated, museums (and heritage) are a performative process where individuals and societies participate and engage, recreating cultural and social value. Moreover, when it comes to difficult history, such as past tragedy and the place where this took place, it is particularly likely to be related to significant social and political issues in the present and even for the future as it ‘threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures’ (Macdonald, 2009, p.1). Thus, emotions related to difficult histories are an

Emotion elicited by museums and the way visitors feel emotion

important area to study, but one that is different and diversely

contingent on the social and cultural context of society or nation and the position of the museum within it.

For instance, Macdonald (2009) researched the Nazi past, and emotions in relation to it, within the current German context. The dominant emotions of Germans around this period of history were awkward and people tried to negotiate this period of history to deal with this unsettling past or even to avoid identification of this past. Smith (2011) investigated visitors' emotional responses towards an exhibition celebrating the Bicentenary year of the 1807 Act of Parliament abolishing the British participation in the slave trade. The interesting outcome of this research is that many (white) British visitors did not attempt to negotiate the historical narratives showcased and, in turn, were likely to disengage from the exhibition.

That is, as seen above, there is shared or proper emotional regime within particular cultural and social contexts, which means that emotions are not just subjective and personal, but rather they represent the perspective of making sense of the world and help people to maintain the social relationship between the individual and their social and political environment (Mesquita, Leersnyder and Boiger, 2016). In this regard, when it comes to some contexts, particularly such as the post-colonial context, difficult histories and emotions relevant to them would be different outside Western contexts. For example, in South Korea and China, who were colonised by Japan, there was a collaboration project between two museums in these countries where 'an attempt to translate a sense of shame into a sense of honour' was made, as an 'exercise in moral reconstruction, a deliberate effort to replace a tarnished past with a noble one' (Dons, 2010 cited in Hand Lee, 2018, p.150). Therefore, within the post-colonial contexts, what the museums in these two countries are doing through the translation is, according to Schwartz and Kim (2010 cited in Huang and Lee, 2018, p.150), showing a desire to teach East Asians and help them acknowledge the different pasts, in terms of shame and honour but differently than the

way Western societies engage with similar issues by doing so with dignity and guilt.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine and explore how difficult historical narratives are exhibited in a certain way and how the emotional regime and what emotions in relation to it are deployed by museums from different contexts, in particular such as post-colonial contexts or Asian contexts, which have not been actively researched. To do so, this paper examines specifically a recent period of difficult history in South Korea as a case study, namely the Japanese colonial period, and how this is dealt with in one of the Korean national museums within the current South Korean context, as a post-colonial context, by looking at the complexity of mixed emotions of anger, pain, and pride provoked by the museum.

This paper investigates and critiques a recently opened exhibition in the Independence Hall of Korea. Korea was colonised by Japan from 1910 to 1945; however, South Korea is still attempting to come to terms with this Japanese colonial period of history, which makes it one of the most difficult histories for South Koreans. Independence Hall of Korea is a museum that was established to counteract the distortion in history textbooks written by the Japanese and to deliver and educate the public on the 'accurate' history of the Japanese colonial period, commemorating the spirit of the independence movements and the independence protesters of Korea. This context of the establishment of the Independence Hall impacts on the way the museum displays the difficult history.

'Shouts of Korean' exhibit opened to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 'March First Independence Movement'<sup>1</sup> in 2019, presenting multiple interpretative modes, from actual photographs of the independence movement to the high-tech display mode that will be explored in some detail later on in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The March First Independence Movement' of Korea occurred in 1919 as a non-violent independence movement voluntarily driven by the Korean public and is considered the biggest independence movement in Korea. It has significant implications for current events and the future of Korea. The significant implications of it will be explained in the following subsections.

In the following paragraphs of this first section, the Japanese colonial period of history is briefly explained, particularly when it comes to how the Japanese ruled over Korea through their assimilation policies. After then, the meaning of the 'March First Independence Movement' and its impacts on Korean society is demonstrated by offering the historical and social context of Korea. The second section will then introduce the newly opened exhibition at the Independence Hall, 'Shouts of Korean', and analyse the implications of the exhibit in order to make the core argument of this article by looking at the complexity of emotions, which are resonated and conveyed by the museum. This analysis was underpinned by participant observation conducted by the author as 'the critical museum visitor'<sup>2</sup> (Lindauer, 2005, p. 204).

By doing so, this paper suggests the significance of looking at emotions in museum within the different contexts from the Western world when understanding what museums are doing around developing themselves to reflect and interact with society and its potential conflicts in a specific context. Consequently, what looking at museums through an emotional lens means, when considering the specific contexts of museums, can also be understood at this moment in time with ICOM's proposed new definition<sup>3</sup> of the museum, and while the discussions and conversations about what a museum is continues within current changing contexts.

### **The Painful History of South Korea: the Japanese Colonial Period (1910-1945)**

During the Japanese colonial period, Military objectives were significantly pursued by the Japanese, along with economic gain as the goal of the rule over Korea (Kim, 2016). As one

means to this end, Japan pursued an assimilation policy in Korea so that they could absorb Korea and mobilise Koreans as a military force in Japanese wars. In order to meet these objectives, the Japanese insisted that Korea and Japan people shared the same origins in anthropology, linguistics and history, called *Il sun dong jo ron* and *Nae sun ill che*, which forced Koreans to devote their life as a loyal subject (servant) to the Japanese emperor (Choi, 2005). For Koreans, devotion to the Japanese emperor was like being forced into 'the spirit of slavery'. 'The spirit of slavery' means to give up their own dignity and the sanctity of their own life for their master (Fukuyama, Francis cited in Choi, 2005, p. 146). Through this, the Japanese attempted to make Koreans think that their happiness and their dignity would be secured only by assimilating themselves into Japanese culture and devoting their life to the Japanese emperor as a loyal subject (servant) (Choi, 2005). Moreover, Japan also insisted that the Japanese would be able to help a Korea that had not been able to progress to become a modern civilisation and modern society on its own, since Korea and its culture was not as developed and instead was seen as being locked into a pre-modern and uncivilised situation (Choi, 2005). In other words, the Japanese believed that they could permanently rule Korea and absorb Korean territory because of their superiority, as well as the similarity in ethnicity and based on its cultural and social influence on Korea.

This period in history as explained above is not only a very difficult history, following Macdonald's term of difficult history as a 'past [that] is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity' (Macdonald,

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2 The critical museum visitor is the one who 'studies how the visual, written, and spatial features of an exhibition collectively' are implicated by 'noting what objects are presented, in what ways, and for what purposes'. (Lindauer, 2005 p. 204)

3 The theme for this issue of *Museological Review* was sparked by the debate around the new museum definition proposed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and discussed during their annual conference in Kyoto, Japan in September. The proposed new definition includes terminology that highlights the role of museums in reflecting and interacting with society. The new definition that was debated is as follows:

"Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."

2009). But also, it is a painful history for South Koreans, which is a reflective notion of the perspective of victims and articulates the way visitors comprehend this period of history emotionally. Therefore, in this paper, the Japanese colonial period history will be referred as the 'painful history of South Korea', including the meaning of the term, difficult history, and highlighting the emotional aspect of acknowledging this period of history.

### **March First Independence Movement in 1919**

Nevertheless, Korea resisted and protested against these assimilation policies during the Japanese colonial period, through not only domestic independence movements, but also overseas pleas and independence movements in other foreign countries, particularly China, by Koreans living abroad (Lee, 2011). The advantage to this is these were areas where Japanese monitoring and censorship of any protests could not be reached and imposed.

In the previous years, during the 1910s, Japan had plundered all variety of resources from Korea and the military police monitored all Koreans in order to suppress any protests of Koreans against the Japanese. Japan also did not allow Koreans to exercise their basic rights, such as freedom of thought, freedom of expression, the right to public assembly and the right of democracy. Furthermore, the laws and regulations, such as expropriation of land legislation and so forth, hindered the economic growth of Korea and, as a result, the lives of the Korean people became worse. Rage and the volition to resist Japan and their colonial rule became stronger and stronger (Lee, 2018). As a result of all these circumstances, the 'March First Independence Movement' was raised in 1919, as a peaceful and non-violent resistance. It started with the independence movements abroad, such as the February Eighth Declaration of independence occurring in Tokyo, Japan, by Korean students studying in Japan at that time (Park, 1996). Regardless of gender, age and class, the Korean people willingly participated in the independence movement, which amounted to one tenth of the entire Korean

population at that time (Shouts of Korean, 2019). The 'March First Independence Movement' in 1919 was the biggest and the most meaningful independence movement, helping all Korean people to become united and enlightened.

The 'March First Independence Movement' has important meaning, not only at the time of the Japanese colonial period, but also in current society. This is because, first of all, the spirit of the 'March First Independence Movement' was based on the theory of natural rights. After the First World War ended, many countries gained independence and nationalism started to be fostered. Particularly, President Woodrow Wilson of the United States emphasised the principle of self-determination, stating: "National aspirations must be respected; people may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. Self-determination is not a mere phrase; it is an imperative principle of action" (Wilson, 1919 cited in Yoo, 2012). These circumstances influenced and inspired Koreans and, furthermore, the 'March First Independence Movement' became the first time for Koreans to exercise their right of resistance based on their recognition and inspiration that as humans, they had their own natural rights (Kim, 1990 cited in Lee, 2011). Additionally, Korea was inspired by not only Wilson's self-determination principle, but also Vladimir Lenin and his communist perspective, Marxism and Leninism. In turn, this led, based on the realisation of their own natural rights, to new social groups of Koreans such as women, working people and peasants who became crucial groups who could lead and join independence movements against Japan after the March First Independence Movement (Shin, 2018).

Furthermore, the provisional government of Korea<sup>4</sup> had not been united before this, but rather divided into three organisations. These three organisations became united into one provisional government of Korea, the Shanghai Provisional Government of Korea, in 1919 after the March First Independence Movement. The reason why the provisional government of Korea was established in Shanghai was that there Japanese power could not reach, allowing the growth

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<sup>4</sup> The provisional government of Korea was a government in exile that was in charge of planning and proceeding with independence movements, not only domestically but also internationally against Japan as the first democratic republic government in Korea's history.



of the independence protests. This provisional government, indeed, claimed to be republican for the first time in Korea. This regime of the provisional government was demonstrated in Article 1 of the Constitution of the provisional government that the 'Republic of Korea is a democratic republic'. In addition to this, Article 2 of the constitution that 'the sovereignty of the Republic of Korea rests with the Korean people' also showed that they aimed to make an independent democratic nation where people had their own natural rights and sovereignty (Lee, 2018). Before the Japanese colonial occupation (1910), Korea was considered the Korean Empire, where only the emperor had the sovereignty of the nation. Nevertheless, after the 'March First Independence Movement' (1919), there was no activists urging a return to monarchy but, rather, the democratic republic government was established emphasising the rights and sovereignty of the people of Korea. Therefore, the 'March First Independence Movement' was not just a movement but a democratic national revolution (Lee, 2018). Furthermore, this implication and the spirit of the 'March First Independence Movement' have become inherent to the constitution of South Korea. The preamble to the constitution of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) starts with the sentence, 'The Republic of Korea inherits the mantle of the Shanghai Provisional Government and March First Independence Movement', which was set up in 1948 after independence from Japan in 1945 (Lee, 2018). That is, the spirit of the March First Independence Movement and Shanghai Provisional Government, natural rights of humans and republicanism, were the starting points for the Republic of Korea, which means that they offer significant implications to society and the Korean people in the present and for the future.

### **'Shouts of Korean', a newly opened exhibition at Independence Hall**

'Shouts of Korean', a new exhibition that opened on the 1st of March 2019, comprises four sections with different themes. First, the actual photographs related to the independence movement and text panels explaining its historical and social background are presented for visitors' understanding on its context. In the second section, there is a diorama display

recreating the horrendous crime, the Jeam-ri Massacre, to show how Japanese committed grievous atrocities in Korea, as well as an exhibit using photographs and oral history videos of survivors. In the third section, the complete text of the Declaration of March First Independence movement is showcased with high technology display techniques. Then, there is an interactive exhibition where visitors can hear Koreans shouting "Long live Korean independence!" and also can record their voice as a part of the exhibition in the last section.

Recognition of the past, particularly a previous tragic event, can draw obligations from later generations, compelling them to acknowledge the event and to commemorate its victims (Thurnell-Read, 2009), which, as a result, might encourage new-found national pride (Fengqi, 2009). In this regard, the Independence Hall imagines visitors can, in the end, feel proud of the history of the Korean independence movements through recognition of the past. However, this process is not only a cognitive process but also absolutely an emotional one. This whole emotional journey performed within this exhibition space to stimulate the national pride of visitors will be analysed by focusing on what emotions the museum elicits from visitors, which are employed in different elements of the exhibition.

In the beginning area of the exhibition hall, the exhibition starts with an explanation of the context of the independence movement and how it started with a variety of participants, not only from domestic groups but also from overseas communities and societies of Korean people living in Shanghai and Japan. These text panels offer more details of the context of the independence movement and the photographs of people and places, showing national independence leaders issuing the Declaration of Independence Movement and where this took place, to offer a historical understanding of the movement context to visitors who might not have historical knowledge about it. In addition, as visitors move forward, they can see the number of Korean victims who were killed (7,509 people, 15,961 were injured, and 46,948 were arrested) by the Japanese during the 'March First Independence Movement'.

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These numbers of Korean victims are exhibited with the addition of actual photographs of the cruel way the Japanese arrested people, and historical objects, such as the map of a plan for the dispatch of Japanese troops.

Text panels and historical objects, including photographs in this section, illuminate the authoritative tone of the museum as a national and educational institution. According to the website of the museum, it tries to deliver the Japanese colonial period history to visitors based on thoroughly researched studies of the historic period (Independence Hall website, accessed on 27th, March, 2020). This is in accordance with, and reflecting on the establishment background of the museum in reaction to the distortion of history in their textbooks by the Japanese.

In addition to this, the museum ultimately desires to inherit and keep the history and spirit of the ancestors who overcame this national crisis and regained independence, so that visitors can establish proper national identity based upon it (Independence Hall website, accessed on 27th, March, 2020). As mentioned, in terms of South Korean context, South Korea is still attempting to overcome a feeling of victimhood and heal the trauma of the colonial period history within this post-colonial context. In this regard, the museum intends

visitors to acknowledge the historical narratives related to the 'March First Independence Movement' first so that visitors can emotionally engage with the historical narratives, and to have national pride and nationhood where they can overcome the trauma, through well-recognised national history.

After this section, the museum showcases the diorama display of the Jeam-ri Massacre (Figure 1), which was on the 15th of April, 1919, when a Japanese army unit led by Lieutenant Arita locked residents of Jeam-ri, Suwon into a local church and massacred them by setting fire to the church, in order to suppress the 'March First Independence Movement' in this area (Shouts of Korean, 2019).

The lighting of this exhibition area is in red, which symbolises the fire set by the Japanese and creates a tragic atmosphere. In addition, the museum exhibits oral history videos of the survivors of the massacre and a quotation from 'The Massacre of Chai-Amm-Ni', the report of the atrocities committed by the Japanese military and police in suppressing the Korean nationalists written by F.W. Schofield, a Canadian missionary born in England in 1919.

*"Such a story seemed almost too terrible to be true and being*



Figure 1: A model display of Jeam-ri Massacre (photographed by the author in 10th, March, 2019)

of such a serious nature I determined to verify it by a personal visit (...) The appearance of the village was one of absolute desolation, about eight houses remained, the rest (31) with the Church had all been burned to the ground” (Shouts of Korean, 2019).

It seems that the museum is trying to provide visitors with a disturbing and bleak atmosphere through dark red light, the scene of the devastated church and oral testimony videos of the survivors stating how horrific it was. In doing so, the museum crafts that visitors can feel strong emotions, such as anger, pain or even shock towards the past, especially the Japanese who killed the Korean people, by helping them become a witness to the horrific and traumatic event. These strong negative emotions might not be the one that visitors expect to encounter in an educational institution. However, it can be understood as a specific emotional register deployed by the museum in order to help visitors to experience an empathetic moment. According to Smith (2016, p. 4), and Marcus, Stoddard, and Woodward (2012, cited in Savenije and de Bruijn, 2017, p. 832), empathy is not a mere expression of sadness or pity towards the past, but the medium for visitors to position themselves in the past and bring the past to present life, envisioning the narratives of the past and thinking about

alternative stories for the present and the future in a creative way. In light of this, the museum is trying to help visitors to feel negative but strong emotions, such as anger and pain towards the past, which leads visitors to imagine the past. As a result, the museum hopes that visitor can come to comprehend the feelings and experiences of people who lived in that past.

In the middle part of the exhibition hall, the complete text of the Declaration of the March First Independence Movement is exhibited with high technology display techniques (Figure 2).

The museum intends visitors to think about and reflect on the spirit of the independence movement and its meaning, based on their emotional experience of the early parts of the exhibition, before encountering the last but the essential part of the exhibition space. This high-tech exhibition method helps visitors to do it effectively, which indicates that visitors are emotionally engaged with it through the embodied experience. When it comes to, particularly, the staged prism exhibition of the Declaration of March First Independence Movement, the light from the prism, which is scattered through the letters of the declaration, dramatically fosters and elicits the feeling that every single letter of the declaration is coming through the mind and whole body of visitors with



Figure 2: the Declaration of March First Independence Movement (photographed by the Author in 10th, March, 2019)



Figure 3: An exhibition area where people can record their voice (photographed by the author in 10th, March, 2019)

the lights from the prism. Indeed, when seeing the lights through the letters becomes the full text of the declaration again on the wall, visitors are able to encounter the moment when the spirit of the March First Independence is established and revived again at this present time through the light of the spirit.

As the last elements of the exhibition, the museum uses the voice of people so that visitors can hear Korean participants' voices shouting "Long live Korean independence" throughout the experience of this exhibition hall. The Independence Hall invited 100 Korean participants<sup>5</sup> to record their voices as a part of the exhibition, in order to 'create an exhibition where the roar of "Long live Korean independence" will reverberate in people's minds (Shouts of Korean, 2019).

In addition, the very last part of the exhibition hall is an experiential interactive where people can record their own voice using the exhibition device and this recording is shown as a colourful light in the exhibition (Figure 3). According to the introduction text panel of this exhibition area, this is 'a space where we can hear the actual voices of the people who participated in the independence movement and add our own' (Shouts of Korean, 2019). By doing so, the museum encourages visitors to 'join the shapers of the history and ensure your voice is heard' (Shouts of Korean, 2019).

The Independence Hall tightly curated this exhibition area with a specific intention. "Long live Korean independence", which visitors are encouraged to shout and hear, is the slogan of the 'March First Independence Movement' when the Korean independence activists continued to resist Japan under severe

<sup>5</sup> The independence Hall called 100 volunteers from South Korean and selected the first 100 people without any consideration of ages or genders to show the popularity of the March First independence movement. The voices of 100 volunteers was recorded in a group all at once rather than individual recordings, which is also in accordance with the intention behind the exhibit (Independence Hall, 2019).

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suppressions. Therefore, hearing and shouting the same slogan with the Korean independence activists engenders that visitors can transcend time and space towards that moment of the independence movement. That is, visitors can experience and feel like they are taking part in the independence movement by hearing and shouting the slogan and recognising their role in the history of who can speak in their voice to the world just like the Korean ancestors did.

Moreover, when visitors enter this last exhibition section, they are likely to have heightened emotions, such as rage, anger, or pain encouraged by the museum through the diverse affective display modes. In this light, the Independence Hall adopts this interactive exhibition strategy at the end of the exhibition in order to make visitors feel proud of the nation and establish their identity as a result of the emotion journey, which is the complex mixed emotions of rage, anger and pain felt throughout. That is, the museum expects visitors to utilise their complex emotions, such as anger and rage, to situate themselves in the past and identify the historical narratives displayed in this painful colonial period history. Consequently, the visitors might come to feel strongly and dramatically national pride and to establish national identity firmly by being a part of such painful history, as well as reflecting on the implications of this period in history. The museum functions by attempting to use emotional strategies of interpretation to educate the public, and by providing a place where visitors can recognise and experience emotional encounters with the traumatic histories and where they can make the trauma pedagogical and emotional, changing the educational experience - the trauma from the past - into new productive perspectives (Britzman, 2000).

### Conclusion

The Independence Hall aims to inspire visitors towards national pride and a strong sense of nationhood by acknowledging the painful history of South Korea, the Japanese colonial period. This whole process, however, is not only didactic but also emotional. The Independence Hall helps visitors to insert themselves into the situation of the Japanese colonial period of history and to think of the meaning of it through their

emotional engagements, by offering a place where visitors can feel dramatic emotions such as rage, anger, or even pain towards the events, all while appreciating the display of the horrific history. The museum also provides visitors with a place where visitors feel an embodied experience through the high-tech display techniques. As a result of this whole emotional journey, the museum ultimately allows visitors to feel like they are a part of the history so that they can find national pride and establish national identity.

Furthermore, this aim of the museum is reflected in the way the museum positions itself in the South Korean context at this moment in time, as a way of dealing with this painful history. As mentioned, South Korea has been attempting to come terms with this painful history and the trauma of the colonial period through national healing projects. In this regard, the museum intends to promote nationhood, which is different from the Japanese and has its own uniqueness, and tries to help the Korean public establish national identity particularly through their emotional engagement.

The fact that museums are used to developing national identity has been well developed and researched in previous literature. On the other hand, as the way this paper analyses what the museum is doing through emotion, looking at national identity and nationhood in museums through an emotion lens has not been emphasised as yet (Watson, 2017 a). That is, the way museums regulate and encourage 'certain types of emotional responses as a form of community identity making' has had little attention and interest shown (Ibid, p. 2). National community and identity are encouraged and established, not only by the historical facts, but also by the feeling where people find they share common emotions with others from the same national group (Watson, 2017 b). In this light of it, the Independence Hall promotes national identity and national pride by adopting and representing specific shared emotions such as anger and rage. Hence, looking at national identity and national pride promoted in museums through an emotion lens needs to be researched more actively.

It is, additionally, important to see particularly post-colonial

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contexts, like the South Korean context about difficult history and emotional responses towards it, which has not been researched actively. Since Korea is a victim who was colonised by the Japanese and trying to come terms with this traumatic painful history, the way to acknowledge and address the traumatic painful history is different when the national pride and a strong sense of nation are emphasised by focusing on the glorious achievements of the nation. Moreover, as shown above, negative emotions such as anger, rage and pain are showcased and encouraged by this museum, contradictorily to those that promote honour and pride of the nation, or a positive outcome, which is what occurs in the Western contexts where museum studies has dominantly developed. This implicates that the successful emotion regimes of nations from post-colonial contexts would be complicated and different. Therefore, it is significant to examine in more depth the complexity of specific emotional regimes adopted and deployed by museums from the post-colonial contexts in particular.

Going back to the ICOM definition, how far is emotion accounted for in this new definition of the museum? Emotion is a significant element when representing historical narratives in museums and to achieving the specific goals of museums, as seen above. According to Smith and Campbell (2015, p.445), “museums are places where people go to feel”. Nevertheless, the new definition of ICOM might overlook the significance of the emotional role in the museum though emotional engagement, particularly contributing to the negotiation of political and other issues related to the past, present and future (Squire, et al., 2007, cited in Watson, 2017 a, p.2) as the case study above has shown. Therefore, this paper would suggest the need to analyse emotions in museums when considering the definition of the museum, which can help to further understand how museums reflect and interact with society while undertaking their social role.

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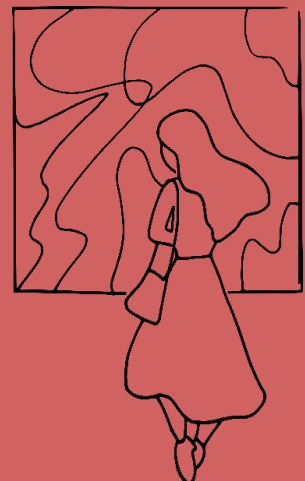
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Much like humanity, the idea of what defines a museum is ever changing and evolving. With that in mind, museums are a bridge from the past to the present, and are for the future. Museums are a safe place for memories, dialogue, community, and artifacts. Museums use their institutional authority to educate and empower their communities to create positive change in the world around them. Museums exist to serve their communities and act as stewards in preservation of the past, preparators for the future. Museums provide a vital form of informal education to their respective audiences. Continuously adapting to the needs of their communities, museums help to provide tools to enable a better understanding of the tumultuous world around us.

**Heidi Summers**, Manager of Marketing, Exhibit Development, and Administration at Flying Fish

### Museums are NOT Instagram Experiences

To define the future of the term “museum”, we must look to the history of the concept. The museum as we know it today, derived from the concept of cabinets of curiosity. The “curio cabinet” began in the sixteenth century as a private collection, usually only a treat for the wealthy. Collections consisted of “naturalia, plants, animals or minerals; artificialia, man-made objects such as sculptures, weapons or paintings; and scientifica, scientific or mechanical objects.”<sup>1</sup>

Recently, the media is inundated with “Instagram-worthy pop-up” museums. The majority of these are in fact, not museums, as they do not showcase a collective history, or even an education concept. These experiences – which is what they are at their core – are interactive fun zones and are an insult to the museum community when called a museum. As a culture, we are moving away from the museum and toward entertainment, more interested in taking photos and creating a cultured facade, rather than actually learning. We must strip away the attempt to be foremost an entertainment, and remember that we are the “keepers of collective memory”<sup>2</sup>. Yes, museums must make money to exist; however, we have diverged into a purely entertainment experience and have forgotten our roots.

As a fan of the traditional definition of a museum, I dislike the inclusion of these pop-up experiences as museums. Much like their curio cabinet predecessors, museums are, and always will be, a collection of historically, scientifically, or culturally significant items, presented in a way to teach the masses.

**Sabra L. A. Gossett**, Registrar and Acting Curator and Collections Manager at Berman Museum

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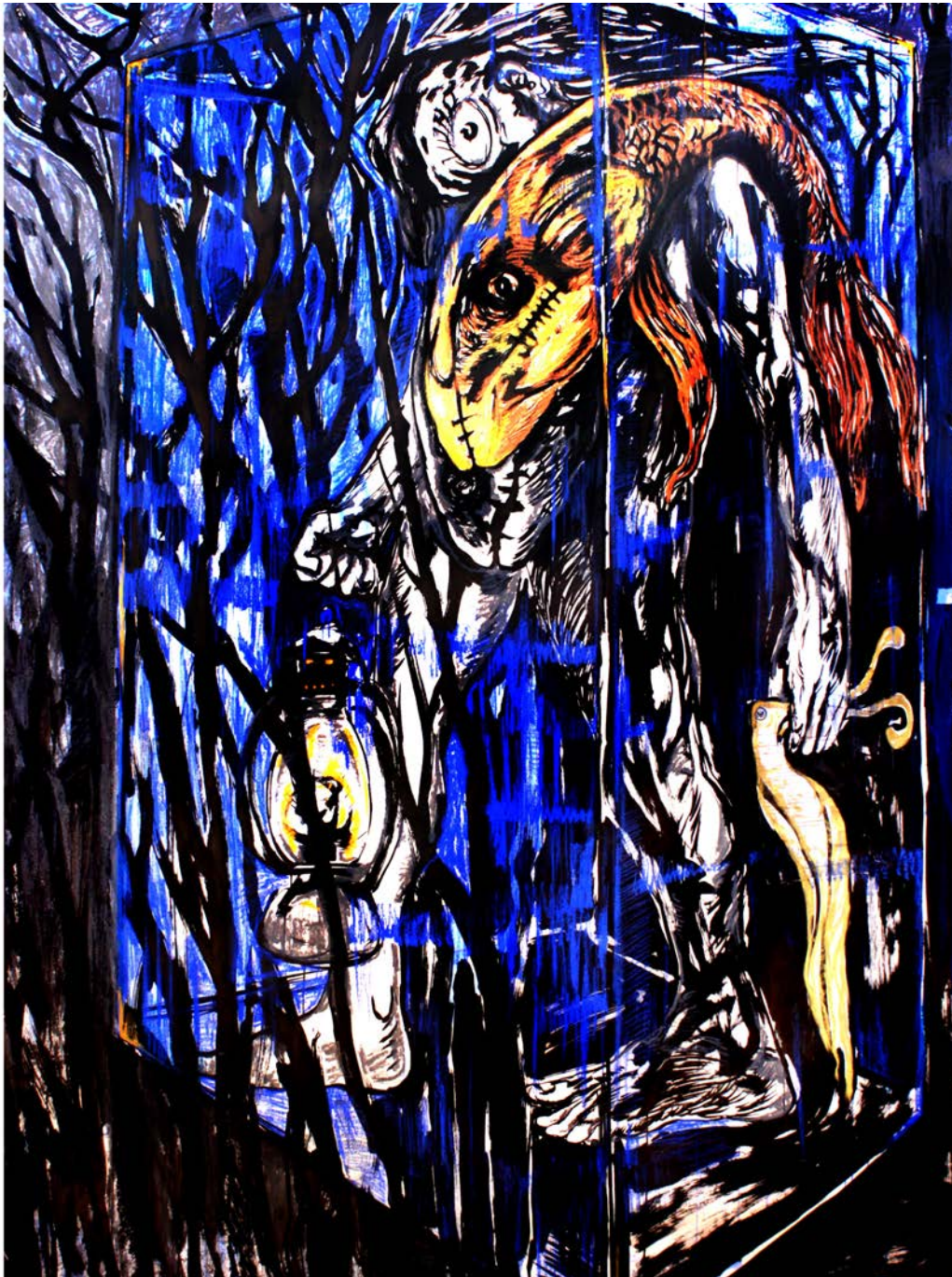
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# No One Can Contain Us

By Anupam Roy



Having in mind museums' displays, the image here aims to capture the ideas of dystopia and temporality, with a specific focus on the mining and looting of natural resources and the affects this has on our lives continuously. I am using temporality to reflect on how history is neither a linear or universal understanding of time, but rather a phenomenological one. If we reflect on how the lives of Native Americans or other Aboriginal people have been historicized and displayed in museums, we can begin to understand how this in turn will happen to us in a repetitive cycle. This image thus represents the museum leaking the past into the present, unable to contain the past within its own walls or display cases, becoming then corrupted, limited and 'frozen in a dialectical present' in contemporary society.

As Claire Bishop argues when writing on radical museology; the radical possibility of today's museology practice is seen through the understanding of contemporaneity. Juxtaposing and countering our understanding of contemporary, she proposes a dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality. History is repeating itself and it is our role to collectively resist this repetition in order to make a change, trying to break out of the 'loop' she references which happens on a basic level in museum display. Through using imagery or effect of a glass box that prisoned the motion of everyday work) and transparent illusion (glass box), it then creates such dialectical tension visually.

Museums: A Place for Content or Context?

Museums are places for viewing, interpreting, and learning. They are spaces to absorb and ingest content from specific time periods and file it away into the recesses of our brain. Most museums have traditionally presented as “neutral” information-deliverers. Many now intentionally address political, social, and cultural issues, such as inclusion, diversity, and acceptance. This shift, in lockstep with social movements such as #MeToo, gender, orientation, and identity acceptance, Black Lives Matter, decolonization, feminism, gun reform, and others, positions museums as central in difficult, controversial conversations. Museums have been forced to adjust from a neutral stance, on the content they display and topics that directly relate to it, to acknowledging the societal context in which they present their work. No longer can an institution mount an exhibition without considering the implications on broad audiences, the conversations it will start, and potential controversial repercussions.

However, there are those who think that this shift is not appropriate; believing that it detracts from the pure purpose of a museum, an institution that exhibits content for viewing, studying, and enjoying.

Museums must find a middle ground, striving to be culturally and socially responsive in a way that invites and accepts all audiences; honest and transparent about the potential issues imbedded in collections or exhibitions while positing that these objects are relevant and important to display. Museums must instigate conversation and inquiry and promote scholarship.

Therefore, the new definition of museums should be as such: Museums are inclusive non-profit institutions that introduce and present artifacts, artworks and ideas from across cultures, heritages, and societies for the purpose of education, and enjoyment. Museums address issues from the past and present through content, and present work within the context of contemporary society to spark dialogue, provide opportunities for interpretation, and celebrate diverse audiences.

**Michelle Friedman**, Head of Education and Academic Initiatives at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield

A museum is a longitudinal, multifaceted celebration of humanity, with all its inherent foibles. Well-intentioned yet flawed, optimistic yet (necessarily) pragmatic, privileged yet (hopefully) introspective. Museums are people. A museum is a process.

**Matthew Tarr**, Director of Digital Architecture, American Museum of Natural History, NY

# The Social Prescription of Museums: Supporting the Health of Our Communities Through Museum Engagement

By Kristy Van Hoven

## Abstract

As the countries across the globe face a health crisis in the 21st century, many communities are reaching a pivotal moment in the future of community health and wellness. As populations age, childhood mental health cases continue to rise and professionals, across all fields, are expressing feelings of stress and burn out in their early to mid-careers when compared with previous generations. The stress of mental health on individual communities is momentous and growing. Museums and their health care-based partners can lead the way in developing community health programs that tip the scales toward community wellness and support individual wellbeing. Through dedicated programs, museums are poised to respond to community health crises as they emerge providing an outlet for patients to engage in activities designed to address broad determinants of health on the recommendation of their primary care providers through the act of social prescribing. This paper explores ways museums have curated experiences that foster healing and health education to their communities which in turn have anecdotally appeared to offer positive health outcomes in their communities. Only time and more research will give definitive answers to the effectiveness of museum-based programs in community health and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Social Prescription, Wellness, Health Care, Community Engagement

Social Prescribing is a way of linking patients in primary care with resources within their community to help support their health and wellbeing (Bicherdike, Booth, Wilson, Farley, & Wright, 2017). Through dedicated programs designed to engage patient groups with their communities, organizations are working to support the health of their communities while introducing the museum to potentially new stakeholders and attempting to alleviate a few burdens on their communities' health care systems (American Alliance of Museums, 2014). Social prescribing as a term is a relatively new being developed alongside the practice it describes in the early 21st century and coined in the United Kingdom by teams of health and museum professionals who are working to support health and wellness in communities across Britain who needed a term that introduces the idea of using social and community resources to support patient care.

Over the past couple decades social prescribing has increased in popularity (Bicherdike, Booth, Wilson, Farley, & Wright, 2017) as communities are facing an increase in use of health

care services while funding for those services is unable to keep up in many countries placing a burden on the health care systems (Scrutton, Holley-Moore, & Bamford, 2018). To ease the increasing burden medical professionals and organizations are partnering with community organizations, and more specifically museums and galleries, to help develop and present engaging programs for their patients (Leung, 2019). The objective of these partnerships between medical professionals and community organizations is to create and present programs that introduce, support, and compliment health care activities as directed by primary care agents. From easing social isolation, to engaging in physical activity, to learning about health and wellbeing, museum programs offer a variety of opportunities for patients to participate in activities throughout their health journey (Chatterjee & Noble, 2013).

Currently, museums of all shapes and sizes are working to provide a space and programming to support health care initiatives in their communities and it is becoming clear that

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engagement with arts and culture organizations are helping to improve public health (Philipp & Thorne, 2018). In North America museums are creating a network of partnerships with local chapters of health care societies, clinical therapists, and primary care providers to create a range of programs that address community needs. From memory care and engaging elderly populations, to education and enrichment programs for visitors with disabilities, and venturing into health care education through public health programming and training for health care providers, museums are providing unique opportunities for their visitors to engage with museum spaces and collections. Upon recommendations of primary care providers, patients are visiting museums or participating in museum-based programs to engage in programs that concentrate on memory stimulation, verbal communication, physical therapy, sharing new health care strategies with the public, or introducing concepts of care to training medical professionals. While each program can be reviewed and analyzed individually for their contributions to museum outreach practice, our goal here is to introduce the concept of social prescription and how museums in general have taken up the call to support their community's health.

Programs such as Meet Me at MOMA (Museum of Modern Art, accessed 2020), one of the earliest and most recognized programs for dementia programs in the United States, have blossomed into a national initiative by museums to engage memory and brain health patients through outreach and in-gallery programs. Programs at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2020), the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery (Alzheimer Society, accessed 2020), and the National Museums Liverpool "House of Memories" project (National Museums Liverpool, accessed 2020), seek to engage visitors with dementia and their caregivers in stimulating programs that encourage communication, recollections, active engagement and (some) physical contact with objects in their collections in an effort to engage the patient-participant in semi-structured therapy while providing the caregiver an opportunity for reprieve and to enjoy spending time with their loved one. Museum based memory care programs are also taking place within care facilities, offering those without

access to museum galleries the opportunity to participate in museum programs as well (The Morris and Sally Jestein Heritage Museum, received 2016). Although these programs tend to be smaller in scale because of the nature of residents' abilities and gathering spaces available in the facility, the programs look very similar to programs striving to engage their participants through verbal and physical contact with objects and stories. The growing presence of these programs through local and national museums hints at the effectiveness of these programs in providing an engaging program for the participants and providing a service to their community while filling a gap in the health care system (Camic, Baker, DClinPsy, & Tischler, 2016).

As social prescribing has become more popular, the structured partnerships between museum and medical organizations have emerged as crucial elements to supporting individual and community health and wellbeing programs (Bicherdike, Booth, Wilson, Farley, & Wright, 2017 & Koebner, et al., 2018). Museo-medical partnerships can be initiated by either museums or health care professionals who have identified a gap in the health care system (generally on a local scale). Although generally it seems that many of the programs highlighted in the literature (especially in North America) were initiated by museums who were looking to support their communities in a new way. As museum staff identified needs in their community relating to wellbeing, partnerships were sought with health care providers to initially understand the nature of the health care gap and to explore ways museum programming could help ease the burden of care. Together these partners worked to build programs that supported patients in their health care journey by providing reprieves from the clinical health care setting (American Alliance of Museums, 2014). As the early programs showed a level of success in engaging patients (Philipp & Thorne, 2018), more opportunities for programs and partnerships have emerged including public health education and mental health support.

Museums have a long tradition of providing meeting spaces for people to gather and engage with objects and stories. Museums have supported informal learning and exploration

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within their walls and have encouraged public engagement through outreach programs. This expertise in public engagement strategies has led to projects and partnerships that aim to connect patients through art, music, and educational programs that address broader determinants of health such as social inclusion and community involvement, exercise and physical activity, and mental health maintenance - all of which tend to fall out of the usual scope of primary care practice (Leung, 2019). Projects, such as the one started by the Alliance for Healthier Communities in Ontario, Canada, aims to engage community health patients in activities and groups that encourage them to become more physically or socially active in an effort to encourage healthier lifestyle habits in the hope that a more active lifestyle will eventually decrease the need for medication, doctors' visits and hospitalizations, ultimately easing a burden on the local health care system (Leung, 2019). Other programs strive to provide support for caregivers and alleviate feelings of isolation and relieve the anxiety associated with isolation due to medical conditions in an effort to improve social networks and feelings of empowerment (Madill, 2014). While other programs are just starting to emerge publicly such as one by the National EMS Museum where in 2019, in conjunction with the launch of their traveling exhibition *The Art of Emergency Care*, the museum hosted a trauma recovery and resiliency program that invited first responders, host museum staff, volunteers and community members to participate in an exhibition viewing and lecture about how creating and sharing art can be part of a trauma recovery strategy (personal observations of author). As these programs continue to evolve, museums look for opportunities to support health initiatives in clinical and public settings and by allowing participants to take control of their activities. By providing a welcoming space to engage in those activities, museums are starting to demonstrate their ability to help alleviate burdens on the health care system and provide structured programs tailored to community health objectives (Philipp & Thorne, 2018 & Bicherdike, Booth, Wilson, Farley, & Wright, 2017).

Museo-medical partnerships and the ongoing use of social prescribing is an interesting crossroad. For over two decades

museums have been quietly working with community partners to provide support in easing the burden on the health care system through programs that encourage active lifestyles, social engagement and foster mental health. However, scholarly literature is lacking in data exploring the effectiveness of these programs in relieving the burden on the health care system (Bicherdike, Booth, Wilson, Farley, & Wright, 2017). Studies and reports have reviewed anecdotal reports from museums and their partners while other studies were narrow in focus and looked to one program and analyzed the data collected through one museum. Through the review of these reports the trend in social prescribing has emerged as an interesting new phenomenon in response to community needs. In the next few years it will be important for those projects that have found anecdotal success with their participants to start to evaluate their programs through a more scholarly data driven way, allowing researchers to more definitively evaluate assertions made by museums and their program partners. With data to back up the assumptions of those who are actively developing and presenting these programs a new platform for thinking around the role of museums in health care and wellbeing will likely emerge (Philipp & Thorne, 2018) and help those engaged in health care partnerships develop strategies that may help create a museo-medical subdiscipline within the museum field.

By engaging in community health initiatives museums are creating partnerships to help support and alleviate the growing burden on local health care systems. Through dedicated evaluation of current programs, museums will be able to definitively demonstrate the support they can provide to their communities through health care-based programs and partnerships. By evaluating current successes and understanding community health needs museums can develop robust programs to support patient care in areas such as social engagement, physical and mental exercise, and community involvement while helping patients combat feelings of isolation, physical restrictions and mental degeneration (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013). Ultimately, museums are poised to become crucial health care partners but first need to gather the data necessary to provide evidence that investment

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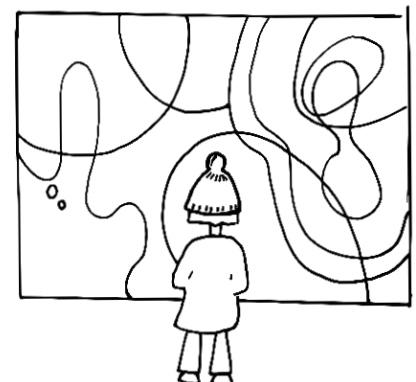
in a museo-medical partnership and the practice of social prescribing museum programs is beneficial to the patient and community wellness.

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## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

What defines a museum? That is a brainy question in the complex spectrum of today's world.

Museums surely play a role in society through exhibitions, programming and projects and can, should and must enable societal well-being by fostering empathy.

If it's true that arts and museums are what structures our identity as humans (museums embody creativity, discovery, comprehension, exchange, emotion, inspiration, curiosity, amusement, transmission, protection...), then museums are us, the symbol of our openness and tolerance. So, today, museums are more alive than ever.

Today's museums should be characterized a strong motivation to try new things, fail and do better. Our museums should not be shy temples of beauty: in order to thrive, stay relevant and operate to serve the public they must take risks. Failure is imperative.

So, ultimately and most importantly, a museum « is ». It's there for itself, to care for the collections it holds, but above all it's there to be open and welcome everyone, all the people it serves through those collections.

I believe, after all, that we should not try to make museums too many things: they will end up being nothing and lose meaning. We should not be fighting over wordy definitions but we should strive for positive action and change.

And how do we make sure museums engage the public and lead it to listen to its call for peace? Through magnetism. I believe museum magnetism will keep them afloat. It's the ability to capture people's attention and heart through charisma and personality. It's the skill of making bold statements, taking relevant positions, being un-neutral.

**Angela Gala**, blogger (musalley.com), founder of the #imamusaller movement on Instagram and @imamusaller on Twitter

Museums have undergone a reawakening. Within the past quarter century, institutions that have historically (perhaps unintentionally) gravitated toward academic or intellectual spheres have re-emerged as community spaces that aim to engage diverse audiences, spark curiosity, and facilitate meaningful conversations about the past, present, and future.

Innovative, publically-oriented approaches to curatorial practice have shifted the focus of the art of exhibition; rather than being places that 'tell' visitors about a subject, theme, or topic, museums are places that 'ask.' This curatorial strategy facilitates informal and open-ended conversation between museum professionals and the public via exhibitions and programs. Public programming is an essential tenet of contemporary museum philosophy, which prioritizes fostering a sense of personal and collective ownership and belonging within museum spaces.

Museums are sites of dialogue; whether through exhibits or programs, they facilitate both passive and active learning that drives progressive and meaningful thought about the subject at hand.

**Pardis Zahedi**, Manager of Historic Sites, St. Charles County Parks Department

When considering the place of museums in society, it would appear imperative for an accurate response that a diverse section of that society has the opportunity to formulate an answer.

A Volunteer project has run at Leeds Industrial Museum for 4 years. Individuals meet weekly to garden the grounds to improve their own wellbeing and mental health by improving green spaces. The question “What is a museum and its current place in society” was put to nine individuals in the group:

Museums are:

- Informative places full of old stuff
- Somewhere to go to get inspiration and ideas
- Where you have to read miles of display boards and get bored stiff
- A way of keeping the past alive
- A way of preserving the past (for old fogeys like me)
- Where you can get a lot of new information
- Places to learn how our forefathers lived. And happy memories
- Somewhere to go on a rainy day
- A place for sketching, spending time with your children, and to show other people about your place
- A place that makes you excited about the world

None of this gardening group stated that museums are places to: garden; meet new people; prevent social isolation; or improve their wellbeing. We know these are some of the reasons why many of these individuals attend this museum regularly, and yet in defining what a museum is they have substantially stuck to what can be seen as traditional definitions of museums, both positive and negative. The museum sector has a long way to go if we want to pull down all elitist barriers and change the perception of our institutions in society to places that are inclusive for all – but should be heartened that according to these people we do work in an “exciting”, “happy”, “informative”, and sometimes “boring”, industry!

**The Colour Garden Volunteers**, Leeds Industrial Museum



# Book Review

## Museum as a Space for Promoting Children's Wellbeing

By Yanrong Jiang

**Chatterjee, Helen and Noble, Guy (Eds.) (2013). *Museums, health and wellbeing*. London, Ashgate Publishing. 160pp., GBP65.99 (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-1409425816**

**Maynard, L and Stuart, Karen (Eds.) (2017). *Promoting young people's wellbeing through empowerment and agency --- a critical framework for practice*. London, Routledge. 182pp., GBP75.31 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781315676418**

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the role heritage organisations can play in contributing to general health and wellbeing. Numerous policy directives and related research, led by some organizations such as the Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) and the Arts Council England (ACE) have encouraged museums to adapt the sector to acknowledge the value of access to culture and heritage in relation to health and wellbeing (MLA, 2010; ACE, 2011). However, there is a paucity of literature related to the function of museums in enhancing this process, as well as the specific services that can be offered to promote children's wellbeing. As this book review highlights, an engagement with these topics could open up a significant area for future research in museology.

By combining two key contributions to the literature - Noble and Chatterjee's (2013) *Museums, Health and Well-being* and Stuart and Maynard's (2017) *Promoting Young People's Wellbeing through Empowerment and Agency* - it can be argued that museums offer a space that can contribute to children's<sup>1</sup> wellbeing. Both books draw on the New Economics Foundation's (2009: p.2) definition of wellbeing, which relates to 'feeling good and functioning well', highlighting the multiple methods museums can use to care for children's

development, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Noble and Chatterjee's (2013) *Museums, Health and Wellbeing* is a vital source for readers to understand the role that museum can play in enhancing health and wellbeing of the general public. This book responds to the 'prevention is better than cure' health reforms in the UK (Department of Health & Social Care, 2018), which advocated that public health systems should not only focus on people facing mental or physical health challenges but also the wider public, because prevention saves lives and money. For example, the Department of Health & Social Care (ibid) encouraged people to stop smoking in public places where it could affect the health of others. Better prevention methods and lifestyles can contribute to better public health outcomes. This model requires a multi-agency approach with an increased reliance on third-sector organisations, such as charities, museums and heritage sites. Noble and Chatterjee (2013) argue that these radical health reforms may create opportunities for organisations such as museums, which have traditionally not been part of the 'public health offer' (ibid: p.1).

Noble and Chatterjee (ibid) attempt to define a new field of research and practice in museums, namely 'Museums in

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the definition of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (unicef, 2010: p. 4), a child is 'a human being below the age of 18 years'. This paper does not refer to any particular age group.

## Museological Review

Health'. This field is heavily grounded in the 'Arts in Health'<sup>2</sup> and is refined by reviewing various associated best practices. The authors bring together a breadth of relevant literature to highlight the value of museums and cultural encounters in enabling tangible health and wellbeing outcomes. They also explore the value of 'Museums in health', by examining the underlying psychological and physiological mechanisms that museums can tap into.

The authors argue that museums can fulfil the role of caring for public health and wellbeing by providing creative and educational experiences in the form of public health education. This book is thus a vital source for museum professionals to explore the contribution that museums can make to public wellbeing. However, the book fails to provide a unified evaluation of the contribution museums can make to individual and/or community health and wellbeing. Thus, the potential impact of museums on these two aspects remains a nebulous topic. This book draws on many pertinent examples to highlight the health and wellbeing benefits museums can offer to vulnerable populations, for instance elderly people, the physically ill and other socially isolated individuals. Yet, children's wellbeing is not sufficiently explored, which is a limitation.

In contrast, Stuart and Maynard's (2017) *Promoting Young People's Wellbeing through Empowerment and Agency* focuses on a specific population: children, young people and families (CYPF). Although this book is not particularly focused on museums, the authors claim that their critical approach could be applied in other contexts where learning takes place, which absolutely including museums. The authors bridge the gap between theory and practice, encouraging all practitioners working with CYPF to understand that they cannot do wellbeing for CYPF because each person is part of a different series of social structures and systems. Equally, agency and empowerment are also dynamic and situational concepts. Therefore, there is no unified way to promote CYPF wellbeing, and CYPF need to actively discover and define

their wellbeing for themselves.

This book draws on a series of theories and summarises a particular approach to achieve this goal, which relies on critical pedagogical methods. It includes three clear phases: awareness (sparking new thoughts or realisations), choice (inspiring CYPF to commit to a change in process) and action (taking action and making changes to their lives). The authors see these three phases as their core model of empowerment and an effective way to help CYPF to discover and promote wellbeing for themselves.

The authors also explore the pathways to developing wellbeing from several perspectives, such as social justice, agency and empowerment. They attest that wellbeing can be accessed, once social justice is achieved. CYPF's wellbeing is surrounded by structures, such as laws, rules, and social norms, which can both constrain and enable CYPF's agency. When people gain agency, their health and wellbeing improve. Apart from these perspectives, the authors also claim that empowerment, which can be seen as a person's personal and/or collective sense of power, is an intrinsic and self-directed process in CYPF's lives. It includes multiple sources of power such as knowledge, roles, positions and assets. Professionals can facilitate this process, providing conditions that may encourage CYPF to empower themselves. This book aims to offer a theoretical and practical guide for institutions and practitioners, dedicated to facilitating social justice and wellbeing in CYPF venues.

Museums can be seen as places that can support people's access to wellbeing, enable children to understand their rights, and to access resources. Museums can help children to gain control over what is happening in their lives and can provide conditions that may enable them to empower themselves through access to museum programming, exhibitions and services. Apart from that, museums also have a social responsibility to acknowledge and act upon inequalities in society (Sandall, 2013). These pathways could help children to realise that they have the equal right to access

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<sup>2</sup> Mike White defines 'Arts in Health' work as 'creative activities that aim to improve individual or community health using arts-based approaches, and that seek to enhance healthcare delivery through provision of artworks or performances' (White, 2009: p.2).

## Museological Review

relevant resources and to enhance their wellbeing. Combining the approaches and practices offered by these two books, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of museums' role in promoting children's wellbeing, and of the possibilities to open up a new field of research in museology.

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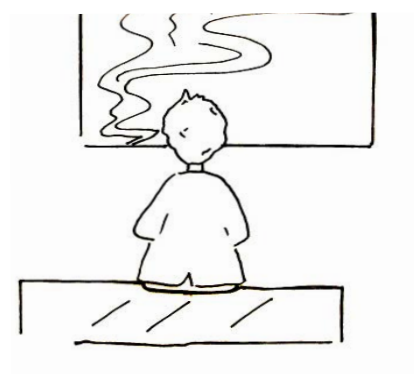
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### Coinciding Definitions

A Museum does not have one definition, museums are defined by each and every person. Museums are therefore defined by multiple coinciding definitions.

Museums are the product of the environment they are within, they are inherently individual. One definition is unnecessarily restrictive, unreflective of many and ignores the reality of museums. Museums are the product of human interaction; each person has their own definition of what a museum is. The affect of this is that every museum forms its own functions, purposes and agency. Museums are not just defined by those who engage and work in them, they are also defined by those who do not currently engage, their absence in itself defines a museum. Museums are also not frozen in time and as society changes, the role of museums has changed alongside, and will continue to do so. The purpose of museums is therefore in perpetual flux, constantly being challenged, redefined and renegotiated by those already engaged, those currently not engaged and those who work in museums.

Museums are defined instead by multiple coinciding definitions, these definitions are diverse and wide ranging, but co-exist. For some it may be the definition outlined by ICOM, the Museums Association, or by another organisation; but for others to name a few, a museum may be a playgroup, classroom, support group, political statement, safe space or act of cultural destruction. Each person holds their own definition of what a museum is. One definition for museums cannot represent all people. Multiple coinciding definitions reflect the breadth and diversity of roles museum's play in society today, without creating an unnecessarily restrictive single definition which will quickly become outdated, irrelevant and increasing restrictive to the continued development of museums. Museums are defined by each individual person.

**William Tregaskes**, Museum Co-ordinator at Cynon Valley Museum and co-founder of FoH Museum

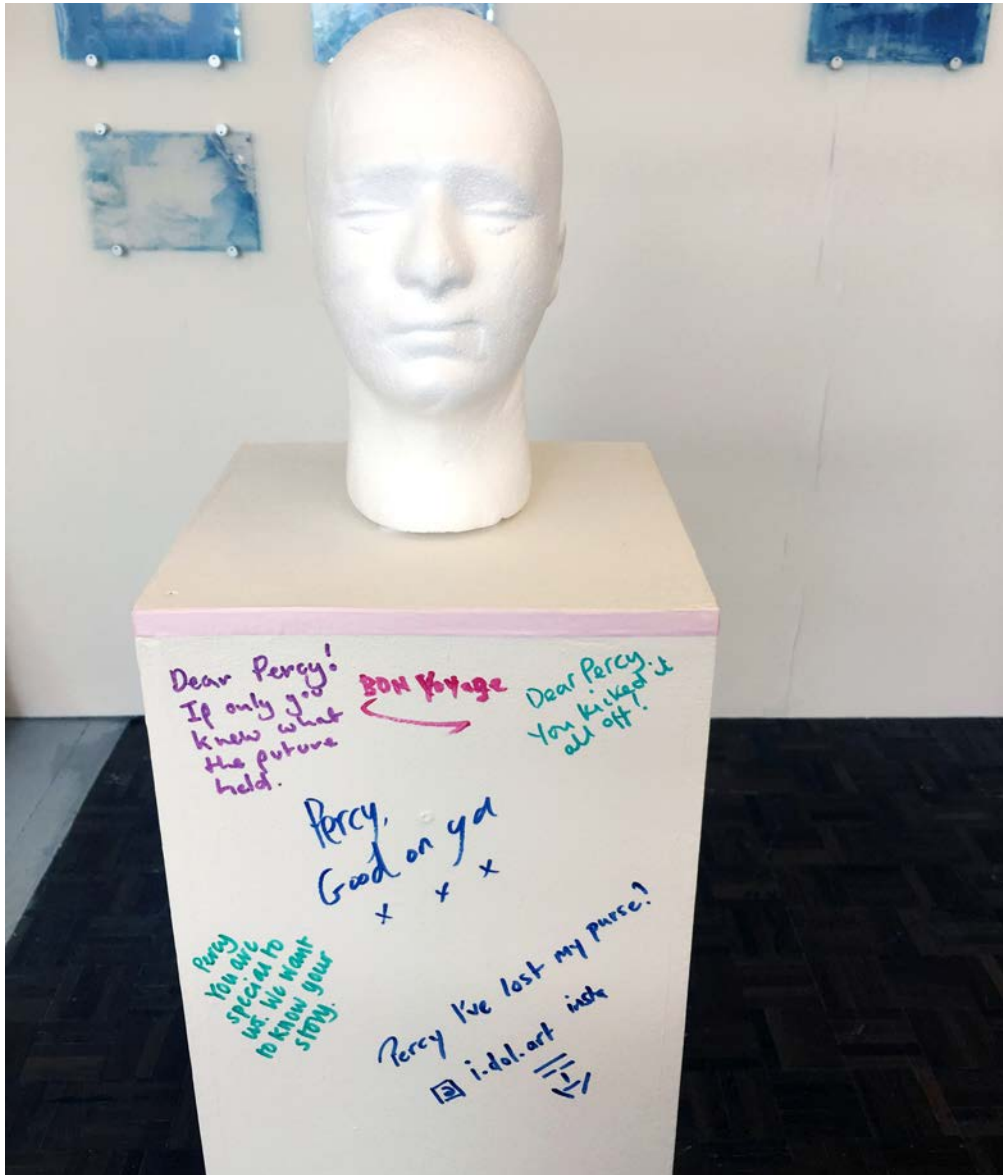
### The Twenty-First-Century Museum: Narrating the past, ready for the future

Echoing Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, a museum is of the public and for the public. A museum combines the visual and the experiential, thereby reducing the distance between past and present, between conceptualization and tangibility. Enabling a museum to function is the ability to educate its audience's predominant demographics, in addition to its capacity for molding its narrative for new visitors who may not reflect that museum's routine visitors. Furthermore, a museum readies itself to quickly update its exhibitions, programming and projects in response to societal changes and new schools of thought. In summation, a museum ensures that members of the public absorb, and will continue to absorb, a museum's content in addition to the fact of the visitors physically being present there. This fundamental characteristic delineates a museum from a site equivalent to any other place on Earth.

**Adam Matthew Shery**, Master of Arts in History, Monmouth University

# Visual Submission Neurodiversity Museum

By Jessica Starns



During a seven-week project in art-based research I collaborated with eight participants to explore 'neurodiversity' - this term refers to a diversity of the brain, for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, autism or ADHD - which the group, including myself, all experience. The aim of this was to consider how we might interpret and curate the history of 'labelling people' by analysing different personal narratives.

The image shows my outcome from this research, a 'Neurodiversity Museum' which takes into consideration the themes shown within our artistic responses, particularly exploring different uses of language and the theme of an accessible protest, and what this might mean when using certain types of interpretation.

Visitors were able to create protest signs on whiteboards to give their opinion on the themes exhibited, allowing them to consider what an 'accessible protest' might mean. During the research we discussed language and made labels about positive, negative, debatable and situational words used to describe neurodiversity. These words were then used on the 'language' cushions present in the space. Visitors were able to leave a message to Percy F, the first diagnosed dyslexic, which in 1896 was labelled 'Congenital Word Blindness'. Around the exhibition there were 'talking labels' and a 'talking book' where visitors could find out more about the artworks displayed through audio. The audience response to the exhibition was that of shock about the historical context of these experiences and the discrimination that this group felt.

## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

A museum, regardless of its contextual basis (art, science, history, etc.), is an institution centered around the collection, conservation, and presentation of the object. It is from such a mission that the all other facets of the museum, like education, publications, and development, grow.

This can be visualized through the creation and continued operation of an art museum. First, the founders of an institution decide upon selection of artistic works they feel is necessary to collect and preserve. This can be a large-scale encyclopedic institution like the Louvre or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where their collections span centuries, or a smaller museum that focuses on a specific art period, style, or artist, like the Noguchi Museum in Queens, NY. Once the collection is compiled, the goal is to safely allow members of the public to see the works on display. This can be either in the form of a permanent collection or a temporary exhibition.

However, more than simply a repository of the collection, the museum also serves to educate the public. This is accomplished in a variety of ways, ranging from wall text and catalogues written in conjunction to the exhibition to the variety of lectures, symposia, and other educational programs that are created to both compliment and supplement the works on display. Such programming must be both engaging for both the erudite scholar and the complete novice. It is also an opportunity to discuss new and insightful information that might not have been able to be part of the original exhibition.

Regardless of what it focuses on, a museum is created for the enrichment of the cultural, historical or scientific heritage of the people it serves. However, the museum cannot exist without an object as its nucleus.

**Anthony James Del Aversano**, Public Programs Associate, the Morgan Library and Museum

Museums are not for profit, educational institutions that contribute to the advancement of human society through preserving the past, intervening the present, and projecting to the future. Museums collect, research, and educate the public from all backgrounds, using tangible objects and intangible elements such as oral traditions, craftsmanship, performance, and the environment. Museums serve as a public space where knowledge exchange and meaningful conversations happen. However, museums are not neutral. Museums take stance on contemporary social issues through different ways their subjects are portrayed and interpreted in their physical or emotional space. Curators, educators, stakeholders, and the public should all be able to contribute to the planning and implementation of exhibits, programming, and the overall missions and trajectories. Through museums, people from diverse, especially historically disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds should be able to access new knowledge, grow consciousness and awareness, and be motivated and empowered to participate in the broader civic conversations.

**Mingqian Liu**, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Architecture, Texas A&M University

# Can Contextual Technologies Favour Museums as Polyphonic Spaces? On the Interplay between Digital and Physical Narratives in Museums.

By Valentina Vavassori

## Abstract

In the contemporary world, people simultaneously live in digital and physical places. It is therefore comprehensible that museums are interested in developing new ways of using technologies to take advantage of and participate in these trends.

Their unphysical nature offers the capability to create new connections between physically distant places/objects, to reconstruct past context(s) and to propose diverse narratives within the same environment, the museum. Nevertheless, museums have a physical nature, they are places which communicate spatial narrative(s). Museums act as maps: they encode in their spatiality the background, the history, the agenda and the biases of the people who created them. Starting from a case study, the 'Di Casa in Casa' chatbot, a treasure hunt between three house museums in Milan (Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, Casa-Museo Boschi Di Stefano), the paper problematises the interplay of digital and physical narratives within the museums, questioning whether contextual technologies, such as chatbots, can really favour museums as polyphonic spaces.

**Keywords:** Spatial Narrative, Digital Place, Catalogues, Chatbot, House Museums

## Digital and Physical Places in Museums

In the digital age people simultaneously move through digital and physical places, on the ground and on the Cloud (Hinton, 2014): the digital places influence and shape our experience of places as much as the physical ones (Farman, 2012; Zook and Graham, 2007).

Various studies have examined digital places created by different technologies, such as Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality (e. g. De Souza e Silva, 2006; Hjort and Pink, 2014), or how digital technologies introduce new forms of mobility, such as mediated mobilities (e.g. Keightley and Reading, 2014) and reading/archiving of experiences (Hoskins, 2017). Researchers have also considered how the digital may re-interpret the physical, subverting and subtling it (see for example the case of Pokémon GO), therefore posing questions about who has the authority to create the digital place (e.g. Stephens, 2013; Hinton, 2014; Farman, 2012; Taylor and Gibson, 2017).

The unphysical nature of the World Wide Web and its

networking capabilities (Dunn, et al., 2019) provide multiple possibilities for museums: connecting distant places in a unifying experience, reconstruct past context and propose multiple narratives within the same environment, the museum. Museums are therefore increasingly interested in providing new digital experiences which may attract new audience and modify the way people visit the museum. Parry (2007) has considered the de-materialisation of the visit and the possibility to conduct the visit off-site, to make the physical accessible through the digital: with mobile contextual technologies the situation is ever more complex because physical and digital are accessible simultaneously and they continuously influence each other. However, the Digital and Physical may contradict each other. For example, in EGO-TRAP (Kahr-Højland, 2010) the user's phone is used as a way to construct a pathway with two alternative narratives inside the museum (Kahr-Højland, 2010) or a digital place. However, the understanding of the museum by the user is filtered through the digital place which is, in this specific case, taken to the extreme: the museum exhibits are declared as "controlled by an evil rat", therefore introducing a metanarrative which partially negates the

museum authority and the museum itself.

### **The Museum as Map**

Despite the increasing interest in the digital, museums have a physical nature: they tell stories within and with space. Museums are social media in which knowledge is given spatial form (Parry, 2007): they propose a certain type of narrative, through the devilish details of an exhibition (e.g. lighting, displays and sound) (Moser, 2010). The museum's narrative is an embodied narrative created within and through space, which depends not only on which objects are selected but also on how they are interpreted and connected (Pearce, 1994; Bennett, 2017; Bodenhamer et al., 2015; Roberts, 2016; Dunn, 2019). The narrative also depends on how they have been connected and interpreted in previous times, their itineraries (Dunn et al, 2019) and how their itineraries are now conveyed by the museum within its current spatial narrative.

In this sense, it is helpful to recall a parallel made by Hooper-Greenhill (2000) and Whitehead (2011) between the museum and the map. The museum, as the map, reifies the agenda, choices and values of the organisation, which is the storyteller. The museum visit therefore depends on the collections and how they are presented by the museum, how museums structure knowledge through space (Parry, 2007). Museums, retrieving Caquard (2011)'s distinction between story and grid maps, can be defined as "narrative stimulators" and as "narrative limiters"; they stimulate narrative creation, but this narrative creation is limited by the grid map: the museum physical, socio-cultural context (see Rowe, Wertsch, & Kosyaeva, 2002). However, as for example Stephens (2013) discussed in the case of Open Street Map, the grid map is not neutral and tells a story per se and illustrates specific point(s) of view. As much as the maps, the museums encode in their spatiality the background, the history, the agenda and the biases of the people who created them.

Starting from the idea of the museum as narrative limiter, an additional question emerges: is the digital place a museum

creates independent from the map?

According to Hinton, a digital place is shaped by the organisation narrative(s): the digital place acts therefore as a limiter as much as the physical and it is representative of the museum background, agenda and ideas of what the museum is and what it should narrate about itself.

As much as the museum wants to be perceived as a-temporal static entity (Parry, 2007)<sup>1</sup> museums have changed over time, from architecture (e.g. MacLeod, 2005; Moser, 2010) to artworks interpretation. In order to study the digital in context and specifically what digital narratives the museums create, it is necessary to study them within a wider historical context and to follow the genesis and changes of the museum narratives over time.

### **Studying the Digital in Context: from the historical catalogues to the Di Casa in Casa Chatbot**

To study the changing narratives over time and to test their presence within the digital place, one of the key instruments are catalogues. Catalogues have three fundamental functions: proposing the narrative to the visitors, justifying it and guiding them through the museum. They are one of the few moments when museums become storytellers who need to justify (at least partially) their own choices and structure. They illustrate the different narratives inside the museums, who is narrating the museum in a specific moment in time, how the Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006) is temporarily fixed and negotiated. They are also immersed in a socio-cultural background and therefore they illustrate the changing forces which shaped and were shaped by the museum.

### **The Case Study: the Di Casa in Casa chatbot and the House Museums**

In order to test the relationship between physical places, digital places and catalogues within museum, the article will analyse a case study, the From house to house ("Di Casa in casa") chatbot. The chatbot is a treasure hunt, available on Facebook Messenger, between Three House Museums (Museo

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. (Smith, 2006).



Poldi Pezzoli, Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, Casa-Museo Boschi Di Stefano) in Milan (Italy) and the park of a fourth one, Villa Necchi Campiglio<sup>2</sup>. Because the main interest is the interplay of digital and physical places within museums and how they came to be over time, it will focus on the cases where the chatbot is used inside the museums.

The treasure hunt is designed in order to guide visitors through a unifying narrative between the museums, “the house before the museum”, asking visitors to solve riddles related to objects or rooms. Visitors are following the clues left by a mysterious, immortal Renaissance Mage who were friends with all the collectors. The narrative therefore connects different places in Milan, going beyond the single enclosed museum, proposing a trans-museums sense of place (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: The Chatbot Introduction. Courtesy of Invisible Studio.

These museums have different collections, were created in different times and are separate institutions, albeit part of a network. In order to understand how the chatbot is structured and effects each museum, it is essential to understand how

their collections' histories and curatorial practices have changed over time. To accomplish these goals, this research uses narratives conveyed by past collection catalogues.

### Museo Poldi Pezzoli

The Museum Poldi Pezzoli was originally the house of Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli, a collector and promoter of Italian Unification. He designed his own house as sort of summa of past styles, time periods and objects, re-read from a nineteenth century point of view without any kind of geographical or chronological classification, but mixing objects according to his own personal narrative. His evolving thoughts about his collection are documented by the testaments of 1861 and 1871. If in the 1861<sup>3</sup> testament the collection was considered as a whole, on which Poldi Pezzoli has invested money and time, and as something which will contribute to the prestige of Milan, in the 1871 testament, he created a Foundation which will administer the apartment, the library, its collection and open them to “the perpetual and public use and benefit according to the rules of the Pinacoteca di Brera”.

In its original settings, after the opening, the museum was a house museum where the spaces were the one the collector lived, perfectly conserved, as proved by the reprint of the 1881 catalogue. The idea of a personal collection was highlighted by the presence of multiple artworks and styles in the same room, where the unifying role was given to the collector's narrative, idea of truth and authority in a not unsimilar role of the polyhistor in the Wunderkammer (Westerhoff, 2001). However, the seed of a second narrative is quite visible, the modern museum one where classification is deemed as necessary to educate the audience (Fiorio, 2011) (see also Bennett, 2017).

This narrative was progressively adopted as proved by successive catalogues (1911; 1937) with an increasing focus towards paintings and the embracing of a chronological and

<sup>2</sup> For an overview on the genesis of the chatbot see (Boiano et al, 2016), (Boiano and Gaia, 2017), (Boiano and Gaia, 2018), (Gaia et al., 2019).

<sup>3</sup> 'Because I have in my estate a collection of ancient weapon, sculptures, paintings and similar art objects, to which I dedicated particular attentions and expenditures, I want it to be conserved untouched to the glory of the collection and that in every event remains as decorum of my home town and as a memory of my love for it.' Both testaments are published in (Galli and Zanni, 2011).



Figure 2: Golden Room. Museo Poldi Pezzoli. Photo by the Author.

geographical criterion. The museum becomes increasingly public and readable as historical document, distant from the current taste but an apt container for paintings. With the bombing of the museum in 1943, the room original set-up was lost and it was decided not to reconstruct it. The transformation of the museum into an art gallery was therefore completed and remains until today: the main focus of the museum are the paintings while the sculptures and other objects representative of the personal narrative of the collector are usually clustered by typology and/or material, recalling the classification adopted in the first catalogue (Fig. 2).

### Museo Bagatti Valsecchi

From 1880s, the brothers Baron Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi started acquiring 15th and 16th century objects for their house in Milan with the aim to create a 19th century version of a Renaissance House. The house was lived in by the family until 1974 when the Bagatti Valsecchi foundation

was established and the museum opened in 1994. Before the opening of the museum, the house was modified and “transferred back in time” as it was before the death of the brothers using as reference the book by Pietro Toesca published in 1917 *La Casa Artistica Italiana. La Casa Bagatti Valsecchi in Milano. Architettura e interni nell stile del Quattrocento e del Cinquecento di Fausto e Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi di Belginate. Arredi dal secolo XIV al XVI porte-camini-sculpture-soffitti-mobili-intagli-bronzi-armi-ferri-maioliche-gioielli-avori-vetri-ricami-arazzi-cuoi-miniature-quadri-affreschi-istr. mus. Etc.*<sup>4</sup> Just from the title it is clear how the house, and subsequently the museum, is an architectural example of how all the listed objects and materials can create together a unified experience.

The opening text by Pietro Toesca, (1917), academic and art historian, elucidates the approach: nowadays, renaissance architectural masterpieces are empty spaces characterised by a lack of life and an inability to imagine how they were in

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Italian Artistic House. The Bagatti-Valsecchi House in Milan. Architecture and interiors of Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi di Belginate in fourteen and fifteen century style. Furniture from 14th to 16th century doors-fireplaces-sculptures-ceilings-furniture-carvings-bronzes-weapons-irons-majolica-jewelry-ivory-glasses-embroideries-tapestries-leathers-miniatures-paintings-frescoes-musical instruments.’



Figure 3: Library. Museo Bagatti Valsecchi. Photo by the Author.

the past, their perfect balance of architecture, decoration and applied arts. They were separated from each other and their original context was lost. However, inside the Casa Bagatti Valsecchi, there is nothing of the chaos of the antiquarian shop nor the “cold regularity of museum collections” (*gelida regolarità delle collezioni di un museo*) but a perfect balance which confirm their dream, to construct a 16th century house and live in it. In Toesca’s description of the house, the basement is not considered because it contained the servants’ quarters, the stables and kitchens. This lack of attention has influenced the museum structure up until today: the first floor is conserved as museum, while the ground floor has been modified and currently is occupied by commercial activities<sup>5</sup>.

When the house became museum, it was decided to take the house back in time to how it was in 1917 (Fig. 3), therefore freezing a specific moment in time of how the house was. The house museum is at the same time not part of the contemporary world, because it is a keyhole to the past, but

it is immersed in everyday life with contemporary audience, initiatives and events. The house museum relies on the concept of authenticity but the “looking through the keyhole” is always partial: we look through what Toesca (and the museum staff) deemed important. For example, we do not know anything about life outside the first floor.

The absolute prominence of the room over the object is confirmed by the current catalogue, where all the rooms are initially described, then some objects are analysed in deeper details, with an art historical perspective. The current layout perfectly illustrates the narrative of the house (e.g. “Giuseppe and Carolina’s bedroom”), the idea of the living space where the single objects are re-contextualised.

#### **Casa-Museo Boschi Di Stefano**

Antonio Boschi and Mariada di Stefano, engineer and ceramist with a strong passion for art respectively, donated their collection to the City of Milan in 1974 and 1988 with

<sup>5</sup> See (West, 2003) and (Smith, 2006) on the exclusionary nature of the representations of the house museums in term of gender and class.



Figure 4: Informale and Manzoni Room. Casa-Museo Boschi Di Stefano. Photo by the Author.

their flat, designed by Pietro Portaluppi<sup>6</sup>. Their collection covers the period between 1920s-early 60s, with a focus on Italian artworks and Lucio Fontana work.

Originally the house was cluttered: the Boschi Di Stefano had around 2500 artworks<sup>7</sup> which today are scattered between the museum, the Museo del Novecento and the deposits of the Municipality of Milan. After the collectors' death, a foundation was created in 1998 to solve a judiciary controversy with the heirs. The foundation is responsible of the conservation of the apartment and the furniture, while the Municipality is in charge of preserving the collection and the building. These two authorities are visible inside the museum which proposes a double narrative: on the one hand, the foundation, according to whom the museum is a house, with a focus on the furniture and the apartment design; on the other, the art gallery with the prominence given by the Municipality to the collection<sup>8</sup> which is treated as unique but partially divisible in different venues in order to illustrate not just the narrative of

the house or of the collectors but a general one about the city, its art and collectors (Fig. 4).

For example, in the first edition of the museum catalogue in 2003, the collection is seen as mirror of Milan and its relationships with artists and collectors, in an evolutionary<sup>9</sup> approach which has been adopted as museum itinerary. The original place of the artworks is identified with their role inside the collection, but not in their original context: the itinerary of the object starts with the collection, perceived as historical document. Its value is in illustrating the "evolution" of art in Milan in the 20th century, and therefore their being inside the collection is the most important thing (see Negri, 2003) and its civic nature. In a fascinating contradiction, the house is not perceived as opposed to this diffused, civic narratives but it reinforces it: the collection has to be preserved as a whole inside the house and used as civic example of art and collectors inside the city.

6 Pietro Portaluppi (1888-1967) was an Italian architect and academic, who designed various projects in Milan with a highly personal style, between *déco* and modernism.

7 (Ghiazza) and (Fiorio) defined it a visual siege.

8 Cf. (Ghiazza, 1993).

9 The term "evolution" and "evolutionary itinerary" are actually used multiple times in the catalogues.

Ghiazza (2003) illustrates the main points of the collection and the museum layout before the opening of the Museo del Novecento: from Bohémien jouant de l'accordéon<sup>10</sup> by Gino Severini to Les Brioches by Giorgio De Chirico, from all the Fontana at the Museo del Novecento<sup>11</sup> to the Egg with fingerprint ("Uovo con impronta") by Manzoni. The catalogue rarely mentions the furniture unless it is a way to justify the presence of the artworks in a certain room<sup>12</sup>. In the second edition, the original text is cut into an itinerary, room by room and does not mention the artworks exhibited at the Museo del Novecento.

However, in the Albums published by the Foundation (2008; 2009; 2011), it is quite clear that artworks are just a part of the house museum: one is dedicated to artworks, one to the family photos and one to the furniture. In the issue dedicated to furniture, the point of view is clear: the museum is an "inhabited museum" and furniture, even unauthentic one, is a necessary feature to give the "affectionate associations" proper of a "Museum-Home" and has to be considered as much as the architecture of the museum. The publication explores the furniture in details and justify its presence in order to balance the past house and the present museum: in this sense the authenticity is not given by the "jump into the past" as in the Bagatti Valsecchi or by the renounce of being an house as in the case of the Poldi Pezzoli, but by the intimacy of the artworks visual experience and museum authority.

In this museum, two networks continuously propose alternative narratives: the house and the museum, the living space and the chronological order, the Municipality and the foundation. Even in the layout the contrast is quite clear: rooms are defined both by their original function within the house and according to the artworks they contain, therefore applying completely different criteria. The audience moves at the same time within the house as the collectors lived it (the bathroom, the sitting room) and within the chronology of art

in the 20th century.

### **From the Physical to the Digital: The Chatbot Narrative**

The previous paragraphs have explored which narratives are present in the catalogues and in the museum layouts. An additional question arises: are these narratives reflected into the digital? The chatbot is contextual, site-specific (Farman, 2012; Hinton, 2014): it requires moving and seeing objects, an embodied experience within the physical space. Therefore, it will be surprising not to see any kind of reference to the physical narrative within the chatbot.

The chatbot proposes a unifying narrative, the house before the museum, the museum as intimate dwelling (Young, 2007; Pavoni, 2008). Nevertheless, this narrative is not perfectly reflected within the catalogues, where cases such as Poldi Pezzoli or partially Boschi Di Stefano, the narrative is more focussed on the objects than on the house. There is also an additional problem. As discussed by Smith (2006), house museums have a fundamental function in shaping national and local identity. Moreover, due to their original private nature, they have a strong focussed identity based on their uniqueness founded on their objects or on the unique collector's narrative, a uniqueness which is also reflected in the way they think of the audience as "elite" and niche, a thought the audience has as well (Smith, 2006).

Therefore, admitting similarities, connecting museums with each other and potentially de-materialising them<sup>13</sup> is complex balance act where their identity needs to be continuously renegotiated. The digital narrative in this sense, thanks to its unphysicality, is a visible representation of this networking. It is therefore not surprising that staff and volunteers were occasionally perplexed when the chatbot was made available during special events to the audience: it was connecting

10 All the artworks mentioned are currently at the Museo del Novecento and not at the Boschi Di Stefano.

11 Except the neon Spatial Concept ('Concetto Spaziale').

12 The new edition of the catalogue in 2015 after the opening of the Museo del Novecento has the same structure: the text is not divided into rooms but it is more an art historical overview of the collection and of its most important artworks. It is also interesting how the division of the collection is justified as distant dialogue with the Museo del Novecento, therefore contracting the previous affirmation of how "the house is alive through the collection".

13 See (Smith, 2006) on the concept of materiality of heritage associated with the country house and (Zanni and Pavoni, 2005) on the physicality of house museums.

different entities and at the same time presenting a counter-narrative (the house, and the house as part of the house museum network and more broadly of Milan and Italy). The chatbot was also perceived as something that was taking away from them the role of storytellers and keepers of narrative: their personal (or sometimes institutional connection such as in the *Boschi Di Stefano*) between places have been overruled by the digital connections made by the chatbot which proposes internal (and occasionally external) points of interests.

In this sense, it becomes a new “Authorised Heritage Discourse”, which establishes what to see inside and outside the museums and in which ways, potentially substituting the volunteers and staff, at least from their point of view. It is a question of authority: if multiple sources of narrative are present, which one is the most powerful or even the most reliable (e.g. Sandell, 2006; Fromm, Golding and Rekdal 2014; Bennett, 2017; Hooper Greenhill, 2000; Goswami, 2018)? Is it the narrative created with and within the chatbot perceived as a superimposition which threatens the museum uniqueness re-contextualising it in a bigger network or as an actual narrative within the museum?

### **Is the digital narrative new?**

Considering the current version of the chatbot<sup>14</sup> some elements of the current digital experience perfectly reflect the museum narratives as they are expressed in the catalogues but, at the same time, it introduces new ways of seeing the museum.

In the case of the *Bagatti Valsecchi*, the chatbot is used to encourage people observing the details which are not explained in the panels, instead of focussing on the room as a whole and its role within the house. In this sense, the chatbot provides additional information and ways of seeing. However, the objects are presented in their role within the house, without distinguishing between authentic and in-style objects (see *Toesca*): their authenticity is derived from being part of the house and not from their provenance or previous itineraries (see Dunn et al, 2019; Gosden and Marshall, 1999) and it is confirmed by the chatbot (and subsequently the

museum). Nevertheless, in the chatbot conversation, there is potential for introducing diverse narrative or, at least, for recognising the partiality and unreliability of the museum narratives. For example, one of the riddles require the user to correctly localise within the museum the room where people ate: if the user replies Kitchen instead of Dining Room, the chatbot clarifies how the barons Fausto and Giuseppe did not eat like “common people”. As mentioned before, because the kitchen was on the ground floor it was not conserved, which is an implicit declaration of partiality and unreliability: the museum is a partial keyhole to the past and therefore its authenticity may be questioned. Another situation where the in-authentic nature of the museum is declared is when it is explained how a door-cover (*copriporta*) was moved because visitors touched it too much: the museum is not as it was in 1917 but it was adapted in order to be a museum. It is not a fixed, a-temporal entity (Parry, 2007).

In the *Boschi Di Stefano*, the narrative focuses on the objects as representative of the personal relationship of the collectors with artists and not an art historical one. The furniture is rarely mentioned, therefore negating the narrative proposed by the Foundation where furniture is fundamental to give a sense of place. The layout of the museum is re-read through the personal relationships of the collectors. The chatbot also explains how the house changed in order to become a museum, how the artworks were chronologically ordered, selected and how the bathroom is the only authentic room. However, it does not mention how the furniture is not authentic as well. This common theme is also expressed in the catalogues. The authenticity of the museum is given by the collection as historical document of Milan art history and history of “taste”, not by the house and therefore it is possible to admit the change over time from the house to the museum. It is different from the *Bagatti Valsecchi* where the authenticity is given by the museum being a house.

The *Poldi Pezzoli* represents a different case: in the second version of the chatbot, the museum is part of the network but not of the superimposed narrative introduced by the chatbot.

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<sup>14</sup> For a review of the older one, see (Tzouganatou, 2018).

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The museum is not a house-keyhole to the past but it is an art gallery where, as mentioned at the start of the conversation with the chatbot, “everyone may admire the objects in his (GianGiacomo) collection and learn art history watching the artworks in person”. The house is completely lost and the superimposed narrative as house is not recognised: the focus of the museum is the collection and not the house or the collector narrative. The museum objects mentioned are also mostly paintings with occasional reference to the rooms. This is due to three main reasons. The first one is that the narrative was not recognised by the museum. The second is that there was the idea to test within the chatbot different narrative strategies, in order to offer a varied experience to the audience. Finally, the third reason is how the chatbot audience may look according to the different museums. While in the case of the Bagatti Valsecchi, and partially in the Boschi Di Stefano, the chatbot is seen as way to engage second time visitors, in the case of the Poldi Pezzoli, the chatbot is designed for first time visitors.

### Conclusion

The International Council of Museums’ (ICOM) newly proposed definition designates museums as polyphonic spaces, storytellers of multiple narratives which safeguard diverse memory for future generations. Can the digital, and specifically contextual technologies, favour the presence of multiple stories within the museums?

On the one hand, this is possible, as the digital partially proposes new stories, as shown by the cases analysed before, where the narrative of the “house before the museum” is created by the chatbot, therefore re-writing the physical in a new way and occasionally implicitly questioning the museum as reliable, neutral storyteller (Sandell, 2006; Fromm, Golding and Rekdal 2014; Bennett, 2017; Hooper Greenhill, 2000; Goswami, 2018; Smith, 2006).

On the other hand, the digital place, as much as the museum, is not neutral: it reflects the organisation narrative, background and agenda, as shown by the analysis of the historical

catalogues. It therefore tends to reproduce the narrative of the physical. Due to the contextual nature of the experience, it also depends on the physical in an additional way: it can rewrite the layout and occasionally add materials and references but if these materials and references are not perceived as part of the museum identity, they will not be accepted. The digital is still dependent on the selective persuasive act of the staff.

The spatial narrative proposed by the museum acts therefore as map, both digital and physical: users move within the map. In this sense, it should be added to the ICOM definition: “museums are polyphonic spaces as much the map permits it”.

Contextual technologies have the potential to partially rewrite the museum space. However, the museum space is born by the organisation narrative which will be reflected in the digital place. To really make the museums spaces polyphonic using the digital means first researching the relationships and narratives within the museum and then create a digital experience which is respectful of other narratives as well. The chatbot highlights that is it possible to present many possible narrative(s). Arguably then, digital experiences have the potential to convey the non-neutrality of the museum through the digital medium, declaring the existence and partiality of the “map”, the fact that the diverse memories are anyway a selection, as much as the voices inside the museums. This is particularly true in the cases considered above, where the map is born from the collectors’ life and experiences which were then adapted to be made public. It however requires an admission by museums of their “situatedness”, of their “embeddedness” in networks” and the abandonment of their role of reliable narrators which illustrate “just the facts” (Goswami, 2018). There are glimpses of it during the chatbot experience and the idea of presenting multiple narratives and storytellers: the chatbot, the volunteers, the labels, the layout, the catalogue. However, it would be necessary to explore whether during the experience of the visitors, these multiple narratives are effectively used by visitors to construct their own (spatial and transmedial)<sup>15</sup> narrative within the museum or if, in the end, one channel (and one narrative) prevails upon

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<sup>15</sup> See (Dunn, 2019).

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the others. The chatbot in this sense is potentially particularly pervasive because it remains as saved conversation within the user phone, a mix of pictures, videos and texts which may act as sanctioned digital memory, substituting other (digital) memory acts (e.g. taking pictures<sup>16</sup>, posting on social media). Its interactivity may be a source of disempowerment of the visitors.

In conclusion, contextual technologies may propose multiple narratives, therefore declaring the museum non-neutrality, but they also can enact an “Authorized Heritage Discourse”, which confirms the museum knowledge map in an even more subtle and pervasive way, extending it beyond the enclosed space of the museum.

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16 On the concept of digital memory, mobile and pictures, see, for example, (Hoskins, 2017), (Keightley and Reading, 2014) and (Hjort and Pink, 2014).



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## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

For me, it is most important to remember that, museums are (or should be) far more than just collections of objects or art. They are social spaces where there is an interaction between the objects, the museum staff and the public. This is what brings the museum to life. Museums are places where, through conversation, the meaning of objects and other broader concepts can be interpreted and reinterpreted. The public place a lot of trust in museums and the information that they find there, but that information is not neutral or a definitive fact. It is, therefore, important to reconsider museums as places which are subjective rather than objective. I think museums can show that they are subjective in a range of ways. For example, they can make it clear that the meaning of objects is not fixed. Highlighting how meaning changes and is constructed gives people the space to bring their own experiences to the museum. It acknowledges that we all have different perspectives and allows for a greater level of interaction between audiences and objects.

However, what is on display in any museum is really only the tip of the iceberg. For the future, museums need to reckon with the vast amount of material which they keep in stores and archives out of the public eye. These are exclusive spaces, only accessible to those within the museum profession. How can we bring these objects to public attention and make them part of the conversation?

I really believe that what should define a museum is how it allows for reimagination and reinterpretation; how it facilitates interaction between its objects, its staff and the communities it serves.

**Harriet Jackson**, Assistant Curator at the Science Museum, London

A space for interaction on levels that transcend geographical extents, historical and conceptual time, as well as perpetuates cultural interchange. In 2019, museums are mediums through which different individuals interact, learn, create and think critically based on the melding of their differing lived experiences with various issues of today. Public programming, events whose frequency may be altered depending on available funding and efficient planning, has become a major contributor to the enhancement of information diffusion and exchange. In addition to the relative flexibility of holding such events, public programs have the capacity to be updated frequently and in line with contemporary issues depending on relevancy, an aspect exhibitions at times struggle with due to lengthy comprehensive planning processes and permanent displays due to slow updating processes. Public programs also link exhibitions to museum audiences, and have the ability to provide understanding where confusion is present relative to displays. Museums should be meant to be a source of illumination and demystification of diverse topics for general audiences as well as attend to the needs specific communities of which these topics directly affect. To me, this is a crucial component of cultural institutions in terms of successfully reaching multiple community audiences with multiple lived experiences. Ultimately, museums are institutions that create centres where knowledge is shared by distinct communities of individuals and have the potential to impact their daily lives. They also have the ability of creating accessibility to education through unconventional teaching methods (outside of the classroom and inside of a gallery or participating in a public program) and by using museum resources (such as objects and exhibition displays) at the intersection of marginalized and privileged communities. Museums connect these individuals through their exhibitions and programming by inciting mutual interest and offer the potential for continued and shared knowledge between these stakeholders.

**Annissa Malvoisin**, Egyptology and Nubian Studies PhD candidate in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto

# From Local to Community Museum: Hastings Museum & Art Gallery's Journey to a Sustainable Future in the Public Sector

By Damian Etherington

## Abstract

Hastings Museum & Art Gallery was established over 125 years ago and has always offered local people and visitors to the town the opportunity to explore its varied collections. From 2016-18 the Finding Our Place project, funded by Arts Council England, reviewed the sustainability of the museum, its collections, programme and organisational health. This work has laid the foundations for the next stage of the museum's development: the transition from a local to a community museum. By adopting a community-led approach, the museum has positioned itself as the delivery vehicle for the local authority's social ambitions, which has led to a significant increase in visitor figures and greater diversification of our audience profile.

**Keywords:** Community, Local Museum

For many in the museum world the past decade will be remembered as one of decline, shrinking budgets, loss of jobs and the threat (if not actual) closure of museums. Following the 2008 economic crisis and the government's subsequent austerity programme, cultural and arts funding across England and Wales has been cut by £400 million (County Councils Network, 2019), and museum closures have steadily increased, peaking in the last few years at approximately 30 per year (Larkin, 2018). In the public sector the impact of government cuts has been particularly acute: at least 64 local authorities have closed museums (Paillard, 2019), almost a quarter have had their funding reduced (Museums Association, 2017), and more than 40% have had their opening hours trimmed (Thorpe, 2017). For small museums funded by local authorities, the challenge has been to survive as councils have withdrawn discretionary services in an attempt to balance budgets and meet the increasing costs of statutory services like social care.

Hastings is a small seaside town in East Sussex with a population of c. 92,000. It is the most deprived town in the South East of England and the thirteenth most deprived in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). Since 2010 the Borough Council has 'lost' £55 million in cumulative central government funding and is

running an annual deficit of more than £1 million. For the museum service in Hastings, austerity has meant the closure of the town's local social history museum in the Old Town Hall and the offsite store. It has also seen a 23% reduction in core budgets from £434,193 in 2010-11 to £336,396 in 2018-19 (Hastings Borough Council, 2011 & 2019), a reduction of £126, 207 when taking account of inflation.

However, to counter these challenges Hastings Borough Council invested heavily in the cultural regeneration of the town in the 2010s. The town's cultural landscape was transformed with the opening of the Hastings Contemporary Gallery (formerly the Jerwood Gallery), the Stade Open Space, the reopening of Hastings Pier following a devastating fire, and other major investments in further and higher education and business infrastructure in the town centre. Cultural momentum continued to build through 2014 with the Hastings & Bexhill UK City of Culture bid and The ROOT 1066 International Festival in 2016. During this time cultural regeneration and the visitor economy became central to Hastings' economic development and future. The aim was for Hastings to be recognised as an international centre of excellence for cultural and scientific creativity (Hastings Borough Council, 2017). It was against this backdrop that in 2016, the 950th Anniversary of the battle of Hastings, the

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Borough Council embarked on a journey to assess the viability of maintaining the museum service for the future. Between 2016 and 2018, the Finding Our Place project, funded by the Arts Council England's Resilience Fund, reviewed the sustainability of the museum, its collections, programme and organisational health. Finding Our Place focused on understanding and defining the museum's position within its changing and challenging operating context and to identify relevant risks, opportunities and resources which would enable the museum service to grow and develop. Central to this process was establishing the core purpose of Hastings Museum & Art Gallery's role within the wider cultural offer of Hastings, to formulate a clear and confident long-term vision and to equip the museum team with the skills and confidence to meet future challenges.

To ensure that evidence and information were gathered effectively, four complementary reviews were commissioned and delivered by external consultants. A spatial review was carried out by specialist architects to analyse and appraise the spatial effectiveness of the existing museum site and to consider potential development options at a conceptual level. A creative consultation was completed to evaluate and explore how the museum's audiences and non-audiences perceive, interact with and use the building, facilities, services and staff. The museum's schools offer was reviewed to address the extremely low uptake by local schools. A museum review was undertaken to assess the museum's place within the local authority and how it could deliver against the Borough Council's corporate priorities, and to examine how to better place the museum in the wider cultural offer. The outcomes of this work demonstrated that the museum's governance structures were fundamentally sound and maintaining it as a directly operated local authority service was the best possible model for this particular service (Hastings Borough Council, 2016). The review recognised that Hastings Museum & Art Gallery had the potential to be an important cultural asset for the town: not only for telling the story of the history of Hastings, but also its broad range of collections which can be used by the museum for exhibition and engagement programmes to interest both local residents and visitors to the

town. However, the review did bring to light a range of issues that would need to be addressed in the short- and medium-term for the service to move forward:

- The team lacked the capacity to develop and deliver a transformative programme.
- Due to lack of infrastructure in the museum building there was limited opportunities to increase income generating opportunities beyond secondary spending in the shop, and charging for additional services such as weddings.
- The low profile and visibility of the museum within Hastings was the result of poor marketing and the failure to fully utilise social media and on-line engagement opportunities.
- A wide range of problems with the internal and external spaces that combined to create a poor physical profile and an inadequate visitor experience.
- The lack of coherence in the interpretation of displays and the failure to provide different levels of engagement for visitors of all ages and abilities.

It was on the basis of this work that in 2018 the council undertook restructuring of the museum's management and appointed a new strategic lead to bring forward the changes required to create a museum that genuinely meets the needs of the local authority and the communities it serves. It was with this change that the foundations for the next stage of the museum's development were laid: the transition from a local to a community museum.

It has long been accepted that cultural heritage is an important part of society; it provides cultural, historical and artistic references for people and communities. The community museum is a concept that brings together strands of current museological, educational and health and well-being theory and practice. It draws heavily on Morris, Hargreaves and McIntyre's *Spectrum of Audience Engagement* (2015), which is based on the premise that both broader and deeper engagement with audiences will lead to increased sustainability for organisations. *Spectrum of Audience Engagement* takes on and develops many of the key principles outlined by Nina Simon in *The Participatory Museum* (2010) and studies carried out by John Falk of the STEM Research

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Center at Oregon State University. It attempts to model the development of museological practice through various stages, from museums as traditional collectors and preservers of authoritative information, to a future where museums realise their potential to empower society and represent multiple viewpoints whilst enabling access to power, knowledge, skills and resources. Museums that position themselves at the progressive side of the 'spectrum', the model argues, "will continue to increase relevance and accessibility and significantly increase the audience for the Museum" (Morris, Hargreaves and McIntyre, 2015:33). This approach has empowered Hastings Museum & Art Gallery to believe it has a role to play in shaping society, promoting life-long learning, upholding values of inclusivity and accessibility, supporting health and well-being and ultimately being a resource that benefits the local community. It is an approach that pervades every part of the museum, from the staffing structure and responsibilities of individuals, to our events programme, from interpretation and collections work through to identifying projects and working with partners.

In the community museum, cultural heritage is explored through the active participation of local people to help build new understandings and shared perspectives to enrich lives and inspire aspirations and imaginations. The community museum reaches beyond the walls of the building and strives to engage with local people in partnership as equals; it is a museum that recognises it is not enough to put on exhibitions and update displays, it must also promote greater inclusion and equity. It is a museum that speaks to and partners with the local community and gives voice to local people to speak up and express themselves. It is a museum that promotes new narratives and encourages visitors and locals to ask questions, create their own meanings and become active contributors. This approach is based on a growing body of evidence of the power of museum as centres of positive social experiences (Mazzanti, 2002; Camic & Chatterjee, 2013; Napier et al., 2014; Chatterjee & Camic, 2015; Lewis, 2018). These studies have demonstrated the economic and social impacts cultural organisations can have in reducing social isolation, improving learning, helping people to acquire new

skills, tackling anxiety, and increasing self-esteem and sense of identity. For Hastings Museum & Art Gallery this means we are deliberately focusing our project work on the areas with the highest indices of deprivation, and to actively work with local community groups to develop projects that will benefit them.

The community museum should place an emphasis on promoting health, well-being, education and lifelong learning. It has long been understood that low educational attainment and limited access to lifelong learning opportunities are barriers to well-being, social resilience and improved life experiences. However, over the past decade health and well-being have also been increasingly recognised as a similar societal issue, linked to persistent inequalities and deprivation. In simple terms, educational opportunity and health are linked to socio-economic background; those from poorer areas more likely to have poor health, low education and less social resilience than those from better-off areas (Dodd & Jones, 2014). A growing body of evidence shows that museums can bring benefits to individual and community health and wellbeing. As such, museums are well positioned to support people to make sense of the world and their place within it.

The community museum is a resilient museum, positioned to capitalise on funding from strategic and grant funding organisations. The grant funding landscape for local authority museums is dominated by Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. In the Mendoza Review (2017) both organisations were tasked with working together more closely to develop a streamlined grants programme for the sector. Their response to this has been a period of review for both organisations' aims and funding priorities. The National Lottery's Strategic Funding Framework (2019) has placed a strong emphasis on engaging a wider range of people with heritage, to meet their new vision of "Inspiring, leading and resourcing the UK's heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future" (NLHF, 2019:12). The Arts Council's new ten-year strategy Let's Create (2020) has similar aspirations for culture and the arts. Their 'case for change' aims to increase the number

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of people accessing cultural activities significantly. Both emphasise the need to engage people from all backgrounds in order to help them realise their creative potential and understand that they can enjoy both culture and heritage on their own terms. But also both place a strong focus on educational opportunities for children and young people as well as supporting the engagement of diverse audiences. By adopting a community approach we are positioning ourselves so that we can capitalise on future funding opportunities from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England. The community-focused approach, which prioritises areas of high deprivation and with groups who are disengaged from arts and heritage, means we will be meeting the aims being articulated by both organisations.

To fulfil the vision of a community museum the lack of staff capacity highlighted in the Finding Our Place report (2016) needed to be addressed. This resulted in the complete reorganisation of the museum team in early 2019. The previous roles of Collections Curator, Curator of Art and World Cultures, and Museum Learning Officer were combined to create three Collection & Engagement Curator posts, each with defined collection areas. This approach deliberately kept curators as experts at the heart of the museum's work, while removing the silos that traditionally have made it difficult for Hastings Museum & Art Gallery to meet the expectations of stakeholders. It has also meant that there are now more collection experts than in the previous structure, which means the museum team can now more effectively care for the collections. The collections team are responsible for developing exhibitions, events and learning opportunities directly with the local community and other partners, ensuring that they will no longer be 'arm's length' experts who only work behind the scenes. The Visitor Services team was also refreshed, with greater emphasis on their uniqueness as front-line collection interpreters, customer care champions and their ability to focus on income generation. The Facilities Coordinator role was also restructured to focus on visitor experience, income generation and audience development. Project funded posts were retained without change.

Since adopting the community approach, the outcomes for the museum have so far been very visible. From January to December 2019 the museum recorded 64,302 visitors, compared to 41,585 for the equivalent period in 2018. We are still analysing the profile of these visitors, but it appears that our audience has become more diverse, with children and people with protected characteristics now making up a significant percentage of our core visitor profile. Indeed, understanding who is using the museum is a foundation block for the community-led approach. We have used the increasingly robust visitor data we collect to develop a targeted and expanded engagement programme, which aims to maintain core visitors while attracting new and diverse audiences. The revitalised events programme has played its part in this increase with more than 8,000 people having taken part in various activities from April to December 2019, an increase of over 5,500 on 2018. We are now developing projects with local groups, including LGBTQ+, refugee and migrant groups, home education and informal learning providers as well as finding ways to respond to contemporary issues, including taking action to address the Climate Crisis, creating a Brexit Archive, and working with community organisations to make the museum a more accessible place to visit.

Likewise, applying the principles of the community museum to externally funded projects like the Museums and Schools programme, which is funded by the Department for Education, has meant the museum has been more confident and radical in working with local schools. Under the direction of our Museum and Schools Programme Officer, visits by local schools have increased by 900% since April 2018. We are also home to one of only two museum-based LEGO Education Innovation Studios in the country. This means we are now able to offer local schools access to high-quality STEM materials and resources that are both fun and engaging for their pupils. We have adopted an inter-disciplinary approach combining traditional elements of heritage and museum learning with arts, sports and well-being practitioners to take our learning programme out of the museum building into the grounds, local schools and community settings.

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It means that projects now being developed are in partnership with local communities.

Hastings Museum & Art Gallery is only at the very start of a journey to become a community museum. The team are aware of the museum's limitations and are open to learning from local communities. We are comfortable taking risks and are certain that failure is going to be part of the learning process. We are working with local communities to learn how to serve them better and to discover what interests them, so that we can tailor our offer to their needs. It would be wrong to claim that we have solved the problems facing the museum but we are now in a stronger and resilient position than at any time over the past decade. By adopting a community approach the museum has positioned itself as the delivery vehicle for the local authority's social ambitions. In an economic climate of continuing budget cuts we understand and embrace the fact that core funding will always be limited, but we are now able to better articulate what our service means to the health, well-being, education and lifelong learning of the communities we serve, and in turn show our core funders the value that a social engaged museum brings.

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## Museological Review - What is a museum to **you** today?

A museum is a space of inclusive learning and dialogue that challenges the public and itself to thoroughly consider the content held and presented within its exhibits, collections, archives, programming, and digital offerings. It looks to the past, present, and future to draw connections, create context, and be a space for the dissemination and debate of information related to humanity, its planetary home, and the worlds beyond.

The museum is a democratizing space that acknowledges the presence of bias both within the world and within its own interpretations. It is not for profit. It seeks to provide those who interact with it with a foundation of knowledge needed to think and question its subject material beyond its physical and/or digital walls. It likewise provides the space for various communities to equitably interact with it, challenge it, and contribute to it through interpretation, teaching, research, collections, preservation efforts, and employment opportunities. It gives equal access and protection to a diversity of physical artifacts, ideas, and memories held in its trust.

The museum equips visitors to take action beyond its space. Visitors are actors in the wider world. The analysis and critical thought that the museum inspires is carried into the wider world by those who are affected by their interactions with the space. As a result, museums have the potential to both positively and negatively contribute to the understanding and actions of the local, national, and global communities of which they are a part of.

**Natalie Sweet**, Program Coordinator, The Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum at Lincoln Memorial University, Tennessee

What defines a museum? Historically, museums have always operated as institutions that have presented a top-down history. Content often perpetuates a one-sided narrative where individuals are declared either winners or losers, victims or villains, rather than showing the complexities of various narratives, public memories, storytelling, and interpretation.

Museums must redefine themselves and re-emerge as institutions that operate as resource centres that allow all community members to share their voices and give an inclusive, honest narrative. Museums should showcase all facets of the human experience and emotion from anger and sadness to happiness and hope. At its simplest form, museums are more than buildings that house artefacts; museums are and should be places that take individuals on a spiritual journey bridging the past with the present and beyond.

**Lance Wheeler**, Education & Public Relations Manager, The Margaret Walker Center & COFO Civil Rights Education Center, Jackson State University



# The Stories Museums Tell

By Mari Østhaug Møystad

## Abstract

The new museum definition proposed by ICOM questions how museums can be inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the future, and it addresses the need to confront the conflicts and challenges of the present. Drawing on my own experiences as a curator for more than 15 years at a museum in Norway, and a case study from Colombia that forms part of my PhD project at the University of Leicester, I focus in this article on the use of lived experience as one way the museum can be more democratic and diverse. I also aim to consider contributing insights into visitor's engagement in exhibitions that deal with difficult subject matters.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, Participation, Inclusive, Critical Dialogue, Lived Experiences

## Lived experiences

Lived experience can be defined as non-formal knowledge based on people's own empirical experiences, life practices or local knowledge. An emphasis on lived experiences in the museum will often involve collaboration with its communities. The museum's role as a facilitator and a place where different groups can meet and discuss, can open the museum up to different groups and put them into "contact-zones", as Marie-Louise Pratt and James Clifford have suggested (Pratt 2007; Clifford 1997). Museum narratives and stories are very often crafted by museum professionals such as curators and educators who draw primarily on their academic backgrounds. However, storytelling at the museum can also be a result of collaboration between museums and external groups, where the primary material is drawn from a process of engaging individuals to tell their stories.

The use of lived experience in museum work aims at broadening the perspectives of the museum by adding narratives and practices that are often developed outside of the museum's formal structures. As already mentioned, the focus on lived experience will often be a result of a collaboration between museums and their communities and can take the form of individual or collective knowledge. Lived experience can offer a different kind of understanding and knowledge and often engage the visitor's empathy. This includes personal stories and knowledge that are not typically academic in character.

Personal stories are only one kind of lived experience that museums incorporate in their educational programmes and public displays.

The period after the Second World War has been called "The Era of the Witness" (Wieviorka 1998) and refers to the importance given to the stories of individuals who have taken part in events of historical importance, not as decision-makers but as objects of these decisions (de Jong 2018: 9-10). The interest in personal stories started with the testimonies of Holocaust survivors but has resulted in the growth of a new memorial culture (ibid.). According to de Jong, these stories have been granted unprecedented importance and have triggered a "competition" that has made historians fear they will lose their authority. The saying "the witness to history is the historian's biggest enemy" (de Jong 2018: 10) offers an example of this. Lived experiences should not, I believe, be viewed as a challenge to the academic disciplines represented at the museum, but as knowledge or experience that works together, as an important addition to formalised, academic knowledge.

## Emotions and difficult knowledge

To give a background to my interest in lived experience I will first give a presentation of my work with the Norwegian Tater/Romani people, where I suggest that the emphasis on lived experience can be one way of resolving some of the challenges

connected to how the museum can collaborate with their communities in an inclusive and democratic way. After this discussion I will proceed to Museo Casa de la Memoria in Colombia, where I look at how visitors perceive and interpret the main exhibition at the museum: how emotions influence the visitor's ability to identify with the victims of violence, and to understand the Colombian conflict better, will be a central question. I will here draw on Roger Simon, both from his discussion on difficult knowledge and in his emphasis on finding a link between the past and the present as a source of hope (Simon 2014). I will also draw on articles by Smith, Gonzales, Apsel and Sodaro on empathy, emotions and affect (Smith 2018, Gonzales 2020, Apsel and Sodaro 2020).

Simon emphasises that at the heart of the matter regarding questions of difficult knowledge is the provocation of affect, and most importantly, the relationship of affect to the instigation and possibilities of thought (Simon 2014: 11-12). The positive influence emotions have over thought is confirmed by Damasio, who states that the more the curator can engage the visitor's sense of emotions without overwhelming her, the more the curator will be able to keep the visitor thinking (Damasio 1994 in Gonzales 2020: 59). How lived experiences provoke affect in particular will be a central question.

### **Lived experiences at Anno Glomdalsmuseet, Norway**

As a curator at Anno Glomdalsmuseet in Norway since 2004 I have been responsible for running exhibitions, cultural activities and educational programmes, about the Tater/Romani culture and history, and the collaboration between the museum and the Tater/Romani people. The Norwegian Tater/Romani people are an ethnic minority group recognised as a national minority in Norway, with rights asset out in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Tater/Romani people are traditionally travelling sales- and craftsmen (and women), and first came to Norway around 1500. The origin of the Tater/Romani

people is subject to many theories, and although various social phenomena 500 years indicate a mixed background, the language points to an Indian origin.

They have endured discrimination, prosecution and prejudice both from local communities and the state authorities. During the 1900s, the Tater/Romani people were subject to heavy-handed assimilation policies by Norwegian authorities, who delegated the implementation of this policy to a private organisation called The Mission for the Homeless. The policies were expressed through laws and legislative decrees that were discriminatory in character. The policies created prejudice towards this minority group, which has led to fear and distrust between the minority and mainstream society. The policies focused on two areas in particular: the transfer of child custody and forced settlement.<sup>1</sup>

The museum's engagement with the Tater/Romani people started as an initiative set up between one of the museum's owners, a local municipality, and an organisation representing the Tater/Romani people. The plan was first to move a small Tater/Romani house to the museum's outdoor area. However, when this project was rejected by the regional Cultural Heritage office, the idea of establishing a cultural centre of Tater/Romani culture in a separate building in the museum was instead suggested. At this stage the plans were often referred to as "The Tater museum" and the Norwegian Cultural Council supported the planning of the project. However, these plans were rejected by "Statsbygg", the Norwegian governments key adviser in construction and property affairs, who thought the plans would be too expensive. When the Norwegian government finally decided to fund a project at the museum, it was presented as the first part of the reconciliation process between the Tater/Romani people and the Norwegian authorities. At the same time, it was clearly stated that the project should be constructed as a part of the museum, and not as a separate unit. This was a

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1 Official Norwegian Reports NOU 2015:7 Summary.

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disappointment for the Tater/Romani, as their dream was to have a “house of their own”<sup>2</sup> (Ashley 2014).

Looking at this history, the rights of the Tater/Romani people to be a part of this project at the museum was a matter of course. Like many other minorities, they had borrowed the slogan “nothing about us without us” from disability activists and claimed their right to define how their stories are told at the museum (Ng, Ware and Greenberg 2017:141-154). After the first years of the planning process, when the Tater/Romani people experienced how their plans were rejected by the authorities, and they had become aware of the power structures that could compromise their plans. The history of the Tater/Romani people and their distrust not only of governmental representatives, but also of all Norwegians that were not a part of their minority made collaboration challenging.

The most important element in the first years of the collaboration was to employ a Tater/Romani at the museum and to establish a reference group in which other members of this minority group were represented. Between 1998 to 2004 only the organisation that had taken the initiative for the project was present as other organisations for the defence of the Tater/Romani people’s rights did not exist at that time. When a second organisation was established and wanted to be a part of the project in 2004, they were also incorporated. After the opening of the exhibition, ‘Latjo drom’<sup>3</sup>, in 2006 the collaboration between the museum and the Tater/Romani people was institutionalized, but at the same time more organisations claimed their right to collaborate. After the museum denied the participation of another organisation, at the request of the Tater/Romani people in the reference group, some doubts concerning the impartiality of the museum was raised. Although the museum

explained that there was a possibility for other organisations to collaborate directly with the museum at a project level, rumours of the museums impartiality continued. This got gradually worse and culminated one year after a committee launched the report “Assimilation and Resistance”. The report was the result of the work of a committee and the last project of the Norwegian state’s reconciliation process towards the minority. The committee investigated the Norwegian assimilation policy from 1850 to 1980 and launched their Official Norwegian Report (NOU 2015:7) in June 2015. One year after the Department of Minority Issues at the Ministry of Interior Affairs, organised consultation meetings presenting the report in different regions in the country. The meetings were poorly managed and ended with turbulence, something that made some of the Tater/Romani people withdraw from all participation, including activities at the museum. This meant a major setback for the museum, and much of the trust the museum had built up during almost fifteen years or more was lost. Tater/Romani people that had been participating in different activities at the museum stopped coming to the museum. They also tried to stop activities at the museum, including educational programmes.

After collaboration between the Tater/Romani people and the Anno Glomdalsmuseet, one of the lessons learnt is that many of the challenges we are confronted with are due to political conflicts extrinsic to the museum. We are also aware that the Tater/Romani people do not always think the projects at the museum are as important as projects that directly benefit their people, such as individual indemnification. There is also an important question relating to representation. One conclusion is clearly that one group of Tater/Romani people cannot represent the whole group. As Mary Stevens concludes, the museum’s effort to collaborate with one group often leads to conflict between migrant groups and ethnic minorities

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2 The first official apology for the national assimilation politics towards the travellers was given in February 1998 and it was repeated in 2000 in the first Governmental white paper concerning National minorities in Norway. In this same white paper, a new centre for the culture and history of the Tater/Romani people at Glomdalsmuseet was announced. The centre was linked to a function as a collective compensation, particularly for the damage the Norwegian assimilation policies had on the culture of Tater/Romani people. The aim of the centre, which was supposed to be an integrated part of the museum, was to strengthen the culture of the Tater/Romani people, focusing primarily on their culture, while a lesser part should focus on the assimilation policies of the government.

3 Latjo drom, is Romani (the language of the Tater/Romani people) and means “the good road”. This is the name of the large main exhibition at the museum, which presents the culture and history of this minority.

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rather than dialogue. The problem is, she says, that when one group receives more attention, other groups feel that they are denied recognition and access to the museum (Stevens 2007, referred in Christina Johansson 2016:124-125). This was clearly the case concerning the collaboration between the museum and the Tater/Romani people. On the other hand, Bernadette Lynch claims that both Pratt and Clifford emphasised that the concept of the contact zone is not only a question of the museum as a meeting place, but also a place where different interests and experiences meet and are an object of struggle (Lynch 2014: 74). Lynch refers also to Mouffe, who claims that the museum's emphasis on dialogue can lead to a vision of the museum as a place where conflict is avoided, and as a result of this the policies in the processes are oppressed (Mouffe 2005, in Lynch 2014:76). This again leads to the museum trying to maintain its cultural authority and ensuring that any unfavourable attention remains hidden (Honing 2005: referred to in Lynch 2014:76). According to Lynch, the museum's task is not to avoid conflict or to create a consensus, it is to create a place, or a contact zone, where the participant learns to articulate and fight for their own visions and goals, and through this learn skills they are able to use in other areas, whether it is formal politics or social action in the community (Cornall and Coelha 2007: 8, referred in Lynch 2014:77). After more than two decades of collaboration, Anno Glomdalsmuseet and the Tater/Romani people have established a dialogue in which many of the decisions are taken as a result of consensus, with disagreements openly expressed. The museum has tried to avoid a collaboration in which it has a cultural authority (Mouffe 2005, in Lynch 2014:76). The museum and the Tater/Romani people are also trying to turn the museum into a contact zone where the Tater/Romany people, both as individuals, and as members of different organisations, can meet and organise different activities, while the museum functions as a facilitator. The Tater/Romani people have, as Lynch emphasises, both through the projects in the museum, and in other institutions, learned to articulate and fight for their vision and goals (Cornall and Coelha 2007: 8, referred in Lynch 2014:77). Today they are active as Human Rights defenders, both defending their own rights, but also working to counter prejudices and

racism more generally. The museum continues to collaborate with the Tater/Romani organisations in a working group and at the same time explore new ways of using their lived experiences in exhibitions and education programmes. Taking into consideration the difficulty of defining representative groups, and the function of the collaboration, the museum's emphasis has in recent years been on incorporating the lived experiences of the Tater/Romani people into the work at the museum. This engagement is centred on the development of both the existing exhibition and other exhibitions, cultural programmes and activities.



Figure 1: Workshop in storytelling at Anno Glomdalsmuseet in 2018.

Lived experience is today used as an integrated part of both curatorial work and educational programmes at Anno Glomdalsmuseet. The Tater/Romani people employed at the museum use their lived experience working with the collections or cultural events, collecting photos, or working in educational programmes and as guides in the exhibition. Their work as guides or co-guides is an important part of the use of their lived experience.



Figure 2: Anna Gustavsen (1944-2020) Tater and former employee at Anno Glomdalsmuseet is guiding the Minister of Interior Affairs in the exhibition Latjo drom. 2007.

Their stories make a strong impression on our visitors and contributes to closing the gap between the past and the present.

The incorporation of Tater/Romani people's histories and voices into the permanent exhibition is also a central part of using lived experiences. The stories presented in the exhibition are the stories of individuals, told by Tater/Romani people and collected by the curator, with as little editing as possible. When exhibitions are renewed the Tater/Romani people are included in the process from the beginning to the end. Sometimes decisions have been taken by the Tater/Romani people, based on their lived experience, against the advice of the curators or designers.



Figure 3: Renewing the Latjo drom exhibition, combining academic knowledge and the lived experiences of the Tater/Romani people.

2016.

### **Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellin, Colombia. A memory museum in the middle of a conflict**

*“There is not one truth. There does not exist a complete story. We all tell stories from our point of view, depending on the role we have had. When the different stories cross their path, the stories transform, they are enriched, and they become more complex”.*<sup>4</sup>

The Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellin is a museum created out of a conflict. It provides an example of how lived experiences are integrated into museum display without formal collaboration with the communities of the victims whose stories are on show, and how the use of lived experiences invoke visitor's emotions.

The citation from the museum's "Medellin memories of violence and resistance" exhibition outlines the museum's position and how the presentation of different stories makes it possible to present a violent and complex past to a diverse public. In the introduction to the main exhibition, the museum emphasises that it exhibits everybody's memories, and that it should be a diverse space encouraging participatory construction of memories.<sup>5</sup> Memory museums in Colombia have been constructed in the middle of an armed conflict and face many challenges: how to present different stories without being perceived as biased? How to make the victims voice heard, and through their stories of suffering contribute to the reconciliation of the Colombian society, where both combating parties understand the necessity of a stable, peaceful and democratic society?

Museums of historical memory such as Museo Casa de la Memoria, have as their prime function to commemorate victims of state and socially-determined, ideologically-motivated crime (McKinnon 2014:52). McKinnon emphasises that human tragedies, such as genocide and war, highlight the fundamental necessity of museums in civil life, with their ability to offer spaces to reflect and orientate us, when faced with suffering and sorrow (McKinnon 2014: 51-52). Following this reflection, reconciliation is also an important goal for these museums. It is the museum of memory's responsibility to filter all the recollections of historical events and place them alongside clear and concise documentary information for the public, no matter how difficult or controversial the public matter may be (McKinnon 2014: 53). The museum's emphasis on the presentation of a plurality of stories, is one important way to ensure the impartiality of the museum. At the same time, this can also be the way that they fail in their obligation as a part of the victim's assistance programme, as the reluctance to be impartial makes it difficult to put one group before another. It is therefore necessary to take a brief look at the background of the establishment of the museum.

<sup>4</sup> "Paisajes nostálgicos" from the exhibition "Medellin memories of violence and resistance"- My translation from Spanish.

<sup>5</sup> Museo Casa de la Memoria, app. Como hacer un museo de una historia que no ha terminado?

### The history of “Museo Casa de la Memoria”

The origin of the museum dates to 2003, when victims of the armed conflict, their allies and human rights defenders, had to fight for victims' rights to be included in the local process for reconciliation. The same year the newly elected president Álvaro Uribe attempted to demobilize the paramilitary forces of Colombia. The demobilization included necessary help to integrate former paramilitaries into society through employment opportunities and psychological support. The victims were not considered as part of this process.<sup>6</sup>

Their representatives subsequently fought for the victims and their rights to be included in the process at a local level. As a response to critics, the municipality of Medellín introduced the “Unity for the attention of the victims” (“La Unidad de atención a las víctimas”) programme. Apart from legal support and psychological help provided for the victims, there was a push to document memory during this process, proposing either a documentation centre or a centre for historical memory.<sup>7</sup> In a city memorandum in 2006 two questions were posed: Why do we want a museum, and for whom? The answer from the citizens was clear. They believed it was important to have a place where the memory of the conflict could be presented, which could also serve as a meeting place. The name “Museo casa de la Memoria” (The Memory House Museum) was suggested.<sup>8</sup> According to the museum web page they have existed as a project within the Victim Assistance program of Medellín City Hall.<sup>9</sup> The museum opened to the public in 2011, and the current main exhibition opened in 2012. Despite the origin of the project as a part of the victims' assistance program, the victims have not been involved in the formal process of making the main exhibition. This is explained by the emphasis the museum puts on being a place for all, where different stories can be heard, and the danger of being considered as partial, in a

complicated ongoing conflict.

There is also the challenge of choosing which victims to collaborate with. The definition of a victim is, according to The Law of Victims from 2012, a person who has individually or collectively suffered harm since the first of January 1985, as a result of violations of International Humanitarian Law or other grave violations of International Human Rights norms.<sup>10</sup> The largest group of victims are people who have been displaced. In 2018 the number of displaced people amounted to more than 8,5 million according to the National Victims registry, a number that constitutes 17 % of the entire Colombian population (Colombia reports, April 2018). Another difficulty concerning collaboration with the victims is that six percent of the victims are represented by more than 3000 different organisations.<sup>11</sup> Obviously this raises important questions of representativity.

In order to involve the victims the museum has employed a coordinator dedicated to working with victims across projects. However, this work is not connected to the exhibition. The victims participating in these projects are mainly people who are poor and displaced, who live in the deprived neighbourhoods of Medellín. Although I didn't hear any complaints about the lack of participation of the victims, I got the impression that the victims felt as if they were left to their own devices in the museum. When a major event was taking place at the museum during my stay, to which the mayor and many important politicians were invited, I asked one of the victims why they were not invited. Her answer was: “The mayor doesn't like the victims”. In a seminar at the museum organised by the university, where the participants had to go to the exhibition and answer different questions, the victims seemed somewhat lost and disoriented. The exhibition is not straightforward, and perhaps more oriented towards people

6 Museo Casa de la Memoria, interview with staff (Head of Investigation) 20.02.2019

7 Museo Casa de la Memoria, interview with staff (Head of Investigation) 20.02.2019.

8 Museo Casa de la Memoria, interview with staff (Head of Investigation). 20.02.2019.

9 [www.museocasadelamemoria.gov.co](http://www.museocasadelamemoria.gov.co)

10 CMH. Justicia y paz. Verdad judicial o verdad histórica? Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2012.

11 Centro de Memoria Histórica (CMH) International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Fundación Social (FS), and Universidad de los Andes. Encuesta nacional: Que piensan los colombianos después de siete años de justicia y paz? (Bogotá: CMH, IOM, Universidad de los Andes, 2012; Unidad de Víctimas. Personal communication (Bogotá, 2013).

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of the same background as the curators responsible for the exhibition – middle class people with a university background.

Leaving the challenges of the collaboration between the museum and the victims behind, we now turn to the experiences of the museum visitors. How are the experiences of the visitors coming to the Museo Casa de la Memoria? Does the use of lived experiences in the museum's main exhibition trigger their affect and emotions and contribute to their ability to identify with the victims of war and violence and give them a deeper reflection of the Colombian conflict? Finally do the use of lived experiences at the museum also give the visitors hope for a better future and make them act against violence, prejudices and injustices?

In order to answer some of these questions, I interviewed 53 visitors in the Museo Casa de la Memoria over a period of two weeks.<sup>12</sup> Before we proceed to some of the visitor's experiences, I will first introduce the exhibition and the components identified as lived experiences.

### Museo Casa de la Memoria



Figure 4: The main exhibition in Museo Casa de la Memoria. 2019.

The main exhibition at the Museo Casa de la Memoria focuses on multiple stories and does not try to present the official story of the conflict. In their attempt to avoid hegemonic, national, one-sided national historical narratives, there has been an increasing focus on individual stories or interactive

experiences aimed at educating and fostering empathy in Memorial museums, and this has been at the expense of the presentation of a historical context (Apsel and Sodaro 2020). This is also the case in Museo Casa de Memoria.

The exhibition has a contemporary pedagogical approach, with more questions raised than answered. Art, poems and music are used in order to touch the visitor's feelings.

The exhibition tells the story of the conflict in Colombia focusing on the region of Antioquia where Medellín is the centre. Composed of sixteen different parts, called experiences, each part is explained in an app that can be downloaded to your smartphone before or after a visit to the museum. This app makes it possible for both Spanish- and English-speaking audiences to follow the exhibition. It also makes it possible to prepare for the visit before arriving at the museum.

Extensive information about the history and reality of the violence in Antioquia in the past and present is provided, although the national history is not always so visible. This gives visitors the possibility to understand and reflect about the conflict in general and the region of Antioquia particularly. The downside is that the information can be a bit overwhelming and difficult to absorb for a visitor that is not familiar with the conflict. The components of lived experiences, judging from the visitors' responses, seem to give the visitors a sense of how the conflict has affected society at a grass-roots level, and to identify with the individuals and families that are victims of the conflict. At the same time, the overall impression in the exhibition is also a message of hope.

There are three main spaces in which lived experiences are used in the exhibition: in video interviews presented in large screens in the main room in the exhibition, in audio boxes (often referred to as bird boxes) placed on the wall where victims tell their stories, and in a dark room full of stars (the starry room) where amateur family photos of disappeared people are presented.

<sup>12</sup> 33 of these interviews were individual interviews and the rest were interviews with two or three individuals. Among these individuals 28 were Colombians, 25 were not from Colombia, seven of the non-Colombians were from other Latin-American countries. I also interviewed a visiting group of students (20) from Cali, and their teacher. Apart from this I interviewed most of the academic staff at the museum.

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In the interviews conducted, the responses of visitors to their experiences using the audio boxes and the video stories, clearly depended on their prior knowledge of the region and the Spanish language. According to Falk, Dierking and Adams, the identity and prior knowledge of visitors is important in understanding how they perceive and interpret an exhibition (John H-Falk, Lynn D. Dierking, Marianna Adams 2006:327-328). The responses of visitors on to “starry room” did not seem to depend much on the identity or prior knowledge of the visitors. This can be explained by Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of resonance, in which the visitor finds a strong link to the experience through something they have experienced before coming to the museum (Greenblatt 1990).

We will now proceed to the three different components of lived experiences in the exhibition and some examples of the visitors responses.

### Visitor’s responses and lived experiences

#### *The bird boxes*



Figure 5: The bird boxes. 2019.

The Small listening boxes in wood, which look like bird boxes, are installed on one wall in the corner of the main exhibition room. If you put your ear next to a hole in the box, you can listen to stories told by local peasants in Antioquia (the region of Medellin) that have been victims of violence. Their stories of violence, disappearance and loss are told in relatively quiet voices. The stories are in Spanish and therefore not accessible for non-Spanish speakers.

Colombian and Latin American visitors generally enjoyed the

“bird boxes”, which they identified as reflecting the voices of the “real victims”, the innocent inhabitants of the Colombian countryside, telling stories about suffering, violence, the disappearance of family members and losing their land. Visitors outside of Latin-America, myself included, had problems understanding the Spanish in the bird boxes. The boxes were also situated quite low on the wall, so you had to bend and stand in quite an awkward position to listen to the stories. Here are some quotes that show the reaction to these stories from one of the Spanish speaking visitors (from Medellin):

*“The bird boxes are very important. Is the way they are telling their stories, in kind of a raw and clear way. The stories are told with this simplicity, without an idea how their stories should be told. These listening stations are very important. They put you in your place, in some way. The stories are important, but (emotionally) hard to listen to.”* (Interview with two Colombian women, nurses from Medellin in their forties, no 2. Sunday 2. February 2019).

Most of the visitors that focused on the “bird boxes” as their favourite component of the exhibition emphasised the (perceived) lack of editing and the fact that the victims told their story in their own way, without taking into consideration their audience. An exhibition, and particularly an audio interview, is always edited by a curator, but in the “bird boxes” the stories are edited in such a way that it gives the visitors the impression that the storyteller is talking freely and without an audience.

The storytellers in the audios are anonymous. Despite this, they are clearly identified as inhabitants of the countryside by Colombian and Latin-American visitors. The audio gives you the impression that you are listening to a message that is not intended for you. You are a witness from the outside, and you are accidentally listening to people telling stories of suffering and loss.

Here is the reaction from two young women from Medellin, who emphasised that the bird boxes were the part of the exhibition they found most emotional:



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*“I sat down in the middle, and it was like they were screaming, it was really....it’s like they were telling the stories without thinking of the audiences. Their expressions..., oh, it was so set in the moment”* (Two girls 29 from Medellin, Thursday 21st of February 2019).

The reaction from the visitors showed primarily their feelings of empathy.<sup>13</sup> The voices made them feel empathy with some of the most vulnerable people in Colombia.<sup>14</sup> Although the voices did not resonate directly with things that had happened in their own life, their prior knowledge and their identity as Colombians made them understand, and feel empathy, with the people telling their stories in the audio. People outside of Latin America on the other hand often lacked not only knowledge of the Spanish language, but also the knowledge of the Colombian society that would make them able to identify the voices in the audio.

### ***The room with the stars (The starry room)***

In a dark room full of stars, at the end of the exhibition, there are amateur photos of families, most of them in black and white, some in colour. The coloured photo resembles a family member that disappeared. The room has different sounds resembling daily life. You can hear somebody scoring a goal or singing a birthday song. The room gives a strong impression of the sadness and loss of the families that have lost their loved ones.

The room with the stars is the part of the exhibition that seemed to be the visitors’ favourite element. Most of the visitors answered, *“The room with the stars”*, when I asked the question; *What did you like most in the exhibition?* When they were asked later in the questionnaire, *Which part of the exhibition did you find most emotionally touching*, most of the visitors gave the same response. Both Colombians, Latin Americans in general and visitors from other regions, identifies with this part of the exhibition.

This is how one man expressed why he liked this part of the exhibition:

*“I thought everything was very interesting, but the thing I liked the most was the hall where they show the photos of the disappeared. They show photos of families, and they put the disappeared person in colours, and the other members of the family in black and white. In this way they show how much this person is missed. This person has disappeared, and the family is changed for ever. There are a lot of photos of the disappeared family members to show how much their disappearance impacted on their family!”* (Man and women from Medellin in their twenties, interview 1, Sunday 17. February 2019).

A young woman, explained how the dark room made an impact on her in this way:

*“The photos in the dark room (with the stars) show fading images of disappeared people, it makes you feel sad and nostalgic at the same time. Most of the photos are made by the family. On the wall there are a phrase saying: We are all going to die, but we don’t know when, this is an expression that it so hard. We do know that almost everybody in Colombia have a family member, but it might be a distant relative, that have been killed or have disappeared, but to enter this room and to see how many families have suffered great losses makes a strong impact on you.”* (Women 29 from Medellin, interview Thursday 21.02.2019).

Another young woman, from USA, was very moved by the room, and particularly when she saw that one of the kids, that had disappeared was born the same year as she:

*“I was very moved by the dark room, with all the people that had passed away. That was very powerful to put it into such a dark space, with so few lights, and place the people that was gone (dead or disappeared) in colours – It was heart-breaking, so many kids that had passed (away), one of them was my age.”*

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13 There is a discussion about the difference between affect and emotions. Emotions are often said to be culturally driven and affect more immediate or bodily reactions (see Watson 2018, for a broader discussion. According to neurological literature there are also a difference between emotions and feelings, when we stop thinking about emotions, that’s feelings, feelings come from emotions (Gonzales 2020:59)

14 The last concept empathy is connected to emotions. Gonzales refers to Latham that experiences of emotions build empathy (Gonzales 2020:61)

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(Women 30, USA, interview Friday 22nd of February).

Personal identification and ‘resonance’ is crucial in “the starry room”. This part was liked by all, and judging from the visitor’s answers, captured most of them emotionally and made them identify with the victim. Looking at the three cited examples from the visitors, they all identify with the families that have lost a family member, but for different reasons. While the Colombians first and foremost mention their solidarity and the feeling that “this could have happened to me”, the young women from the US mentions the age of one of one of the victims, the same as hers, as the reason for her identification. The possibility to relate to, and identify with, the victims in the starry room, from different perspectives, identities and life experiences, seems to be the main reason for so many visitors engage emotionally with this part of the exhibition. Looking at Greenblatts concept resonance and wonder, replacing wonder with emotion and resonance with identification, as Gonzales suggests, the visitors identification and emotional response in “The Starry room” can be interpreted as a museum experience that can reflect the visitors former experience, and an experience that in some way can be linked to something they have experienced before (or after) their museum visit (Gonzales 2020:60). Defined as lived experiences, this museum experience is rather staged and curated, but at the same time it triggers the same emotions, as the more “natural” components of lived experiences showed in museum exhibitions. Another factor here maybe that the visitors themselves are free to make their own interpretations, the museum is not making clear presumptions or concrete guidelines to direct the visitors. This makes it easier for the visitors to use their own personal experiences as references.

### **Video stories (witnesses/victims’ stories)**

The video-stories, or witness stories, are presented on large screens permitting visitors to stand in front of the screens as if they were having a face to face conversation. The stories are told by individuals, many of them activists, and others that in some way or another have been struggling to change the Colombian society. The stories are told in Spanish, with English subtitles. The videos are constructed to make the

visitors engage with their audiences. The people telling their stories are standing up in life-size dimension, looking right at you, and you indeed feel as if they are talking directly to you. Video documentation was first used to give voice and faces back to the victims of Holocaust who were first only represented through “haggard bodies and heaps of corpses” (Jong 2018:58). The Fortunoff Archive, which pioneered in the use of videos, believed that the survivors’ faces would add immediacy and evidentiality to the testimonies (Jong 2018:58). This was particularly important as many victims felt that the ownership of their stories was taken away from them after Marvin Chomsky’s miniseries *Holocaust was showed in the television in the nineteen seventies* (de Jong 2018:58).



Figure 6: Listening to the video stories. 2019.

The response and engagement of visitors with the video stories was diverse. Some found the videos very engaging, other found them difficult to relate to. Non-Latin-American visitors generally reacted positively towards the stories, but language was an issue, and some of them felt that they were missing the content of the stories because they did not understand the language. Despite language barriers, non-Spanish speaking visitors generally enjoyed the videos, and some of them said that this was the part of the exhibition they liked the most:

*“I liked the videos best, the courage (people showed), they tried to make a difference and they were driven to move forward, also under threats and pressure, one guy started from the wrong side and switched side. He started out as a military and ended up working more for humanity and for the things he believed in. That was powerful. It was something hard to understand, so it would have been nice to know more Spanish!”* (women 30 and male 63, USA).

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Listening to the different stories, many of them from union or community leaders or activists that had endured losses and persecution, still doing their best to make Colombian society a better place for all, made some of the visitors express their hope for the future. The stories linked the past to the present and give hope for the future, as Roger Simon (2014) has emphasised. Some of the Colombian visitors expressed that they found this part “too political” and they questioned the impartiality of the exhibition. As many pointed out, the storyteller could be identified as activist or community leader, but they could not be identified as “innocent victims”, as in the audio or “bird boxes” in which people were telling their stories.

In spite of this, many of the Colombian visitors enjoyed the video stories, and put emphasis on the value of real life stories: *“The story of a person must be respected, because she (or he) lived through it, this is the reality she had to endure. The stories move you and you get emotional. It also gives information, that is different from the information you get by reading a book”* (Couple in their twenties from Medellin, Sunday 17th of February).

The visitor points at individual stories in video display as witnesses of history (de Jong 2018). According to de Jong the most important for the “witnesses of history” is to tell the story to an audience in order to educate (de Jong 2018). The knowledge the witness to history provides, is a past event that always is inaccessible for the audience. *“Through the witness we are not only looking for information on an event, we are rather looking for contact with the event”* (Gert Gooskens 2011:154 italics in original, cited in Jong 2018:37). The witness has an aura of authenticity and knows *“what is was really like, and what it felt like”* (Jong 2018:37).

The visitors that liked the videos points to the connection with the event, as de Jong emphasises (Jong 2018), or as Simon puts it, the ability to link the past to the present (Simon 2014).

The emotional aspect of listening to a personal story is emphasised by visitors that liked the stories, but sometimes

stories also can be too emotional. One Mexican visitor clearly stated that he did not want to stop and listen to the stories. He looked briefly at them but soon moved on because he felt that he could not take any more. The feeling of being overwhelmed is what Simon (2014) refers to with the difficult stories: they are not difficult because of the subject matter, they are difficult because the audience, or the visitor is not able to transform it into sensible thoughts. As Gonzales (2020) also states, too much emotion makes it hard to think. This is also something Felman (1992) says. He calls it “flooding”, when the audiences are not able to take in more of the history of a Holocaust witness and become overwhelmed with anxiety and fear of being absorbed by the story.

### **The visitors general experiences from the exhibition**

Most of the people interviewed expressed a general satisfaction with the exhibition. Visitors from outside of Latin-America expressed a satisfaction of understanding the conflict better, something that also caused them to empathize more with the victims of the conflict.

Poems, music and vocabulary are used throughout the exhibition to construct an ambience that makes visitors emotionally receptive. Most of visitors enjoyed the ambience in the exhibition, but some visitors felt they were manipulated. Creating emotional or affective responses from the visitors, which in some way or another can be viewed as hidden can make the visitors feel manipulated and can make them less receptive to the message the museum is trying to create. As Gonzales emphasises, visitors are not passive and subject to easy manipulation (Gonzales 2020: 6).

The answers of the visitors generally reflected that the museum fulfilled their primary responsibilities, what McKinnon defines to; *“... filter all the recollections of historical events and place them alongside clear concise and documentary information for the public....”* (McKinnon 2014:53).

One man from USA expressed it in this way:

*“Most people in the world want to live a peaceful and decent*

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life. That is the basic message of the museum, to speak to the basic needs of humanity. Everything was very heartfelt and well written. They put the art together- that was super interesting.” (Man 63, USA, Friday 22nd of February 2019).

The feeling of having the different events organised understanding the conflict better, was also the case for Colombian visitors. Two nurses (female) in their forties from Medellin were particularly emotional in their responses:

*“We knew all about is, the FARC guerrilla, the conflict in Medellin, all the displaced people, the killing of our leaders, the narco-trafficking, all the violence, but we found it presented in such a way, and collected in a manner that was so clear, so organised, that it reached our soul, it made us sad, we even cried!”* (Colombian women, nurses from Medellin in their forties, Sunday 17. February 2019).

This citation clearly tells us that the visitors are happy with the exhibition and the way the material is presented, but also show their affect and emotions. The sadness expressed is linked to the organisation of the material, which can seem a bit surprising, but it can be interpreted as this made them understand the magnitude of the violence in another way than the day to day news of violence they used to receive. The organisation of the material gave them a “bird view” of the Colombian violence and made them see everything at the same time.

The same two women, were also very positive towards the exhibition and surprised to find so much positive information:

*“We expected that everything would be death and violence, but there were a lot of information and messages that were beautiful and positive, and there was technology to support the learning process, in this conflict that has been so hard for us.”* ( Two Colombian women and nurses, from Medellin in their forties, Sunday 17th of February, second interview)

These women said that they had been working as nurses during the most violent time in Medellin, and they were

among the health workers that had to receive all the people wounded from in the violence. As they said, *“For us it has been hard, we had to live through all this violence”*.

The victims of the conflict are not only present as “voices” in the exhibition. They are also visitors at the museum. One brother and sister, victims of the war, were positive towards the museum visit and stated the following:

*“We are also victims of the violence, my brother and I, they killed our dad in 2000, we are internally displaced from Uruba. Friends and families have also been victims. We grew up looking at all this. Is touching and hard at the same time, but we have survived. We live nearby and we wanted to get to know the museum, this is the second time we come her.”* (Brother and sister eighteen and twenty, from Colombia, living in Medellin, both student. (Interview Tuesday 19th of February 2019).

Another woman who visited the museum with her daughter for the first time, gave a very emotional response on her visit. She and the daughter lived nearby but had never visited the museum before:

*“The museum is a treasure; I want to call my sister and say: Look what I discovered just nearby our house! I want to come back shortly and take my niece with me!”* (3rd interview, 17th of February 2019, two women, mother 35 and daughter 11).

The museum has a lot of information but poses more questions than answers and leads the visitors to draw their own conclusions. This is something that is appreciated by many visitors. A Colombia woman from the coast, herself internally displaced, put it like this:

*“The museum does not give you a clear message in the sense as saying: “Go out and do this”. They kind of show you everything, and then they say: “Now what? What are you going to do with this? What do you think about this? They give you loads of information and it up to you what you want to do with it!”* (Women 22 years from the Colombian coast, interview Friday 22nd, 2nd interview).

This response gives a very positive view of the museums possibility to change the attitudes of the visitors. As the visitor emphasises, the museum does not tell the visitors what to do, the museum qualifies the visitors to act, based on their own interpretations of the exhibition. This is maybe the most significant hope that museum exhibitions can give, to provide trustworthy information that makes visitors think for themselves, and hopefully also act.

One important aspect, according to Gonzales, is to have a balance between emotions and cognition. Too many emotions make it hard to think, while too little emotions make an experience bland and unmemorable (Gonzales 2020: 59). When emotions and cognition are in a proper balance, there is a sweet spot that is beneficial for learning and making memories (Duncko 1995: 329-335, in Gonzales 2020:59). As a conclusion, the more a curator can engage the visitors emotions without overwhelming her, the more the curator will keep the visitor thinking (Gonzales 2020:77).

### **Some concluding remarks**

Very different forms of knowledge and education practice can be defined as lived experience, and include, to varying degrees, the involvement of the museums communities as the two examples in this article illustrates.

The use of lived experience often evokes the visitor's emotions particularly when they can listen to a person telling his or her story. This creates a proximity to the event, as de Jong (2011) emphasizes. The story then becomes the framework through which the past comes to matter in the present, as Simon (2012) states. The diversity of stories, and the diversity of ways of using lived experiences, can give power to communities, when their voices are heard and someone from their community tells their story to a museum. The question is still, as Mc Kinnon suggests, if it is necessary to have a collaboration between the museum and the communities to engender trust (Mc Kinnon 2014:72).

Most museums today use lived experience in one way or another, but only a few (except from historical witnesses' programs at museums) are particularly dedicated to researching how and why museums should use lived experiences. The use of lived experience of disabled in museum projects show the importance of considering people's own experiences in museums in order to create diverse and inclusive museums (Sandell 2010).

The Journal of Museum Education dedicated one of their editions to the presentation of the use of lived experiences in different museums.<sup>15</sup> The editor of the Journal, Cynthia Robinson, emphasized that culturally specific museums have been pioneers in the use of lived experience, first and foremost regarding guided tours in museums (Robinson 2018). Robinson puts emphasise on the incorporation of shared authority and multiple perspectives, a view that is shared by Sandell. Sandell emphasises that by using lived experiences the museum can be more democratic and resist an ethnocentric view and a "narrow, museum centric concern with curatorial matters of representation" (Sandell 2017:115). Perhaps we don't have to be afraid of using lived experience. As stated in the introduction, the use of lived experience does not mean putting academic knowledge on the side-line. Lived experience is an additional resource that works together with traditional museum knowledge, creating better museums for all. The use of lived experiences should be a part of the discussion concerning ICOM's new museum definition, particularly when the relationship between the museum and their communities is discussed.

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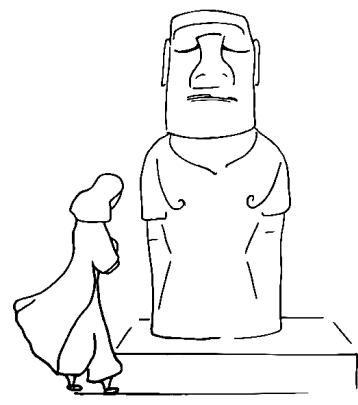
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Museums are engaged public settings, structured by materiality, and accountable for providing accessible, meaningful, and useful opportunities for encountering, challenging, incorporating, transforming, and representing the understandings, experiences, and products of specialists.

This statement has a number of components to be explicated:

“Engaged public settings” highlights the necessity for museums to be committed to “community/ies” (not a concept to be taken for granted), and, as a “setting,” a museum need not be an edifice or physical place – virtual museums count.

“Structured by materiality” is intentionally broad – it can mean an old-fashioned repository of separable objects, or it can comfortably accommodate Harmon’s Object Oriented Ontology or Latour’s Actor Network Theory. And, because it is “structured” by materiality, a museum need not actually house collections or objects. Still, museums’ special relationship to materiality is fundamental.

Being “accountable” recognizes multiple sorts of oversight, which can simultaneously include boards, constituents, artists, and source communities. This also means accountability to issues such as social justice or climate change.

Providing opportunities that are “accessible, meaningful, and useful” implies – no, requires – that museums establish relationships with those to whom their offerings might be accessible, meaningful, and/or useful – or not – and strive to learn how those concepts can be actualized.

And, “encountering, challenging, incorporating, transforming, and representing” goes beyond passive ideas of education and learning to ask museums to create ways for visitors/users/constituents to have an active role in shaping experiences that are mediated by “understandings, experiences, and products of specialists.” I purposefully use the word specialist to extend beyond academically informed experts and incorporate those, such as artists and indigenous specialists, whose interpretive abilities derive from a wide range of sources.

**Peter Welsh**, PhD, Professor & Director of Museum Studies, The University of Kansas





Museums: A New Definition

Museums collect objects and specimens to record and tell stories of human interaction with each other, and with the natural world. Rooted in a status of permanence they care for their collections but have the flexibility to respond to change, by looking to the future as well as the past. Shaped by ethics their collections are for all who wish to engage with them for learning, debate, contemplation, enjoyment and inspiration. Flourishing in humanity they are the voices of those who wish to speak and those who wish to listen, and those who are unable to do either.

**Jenny Durrant**, PhD researcher, Museum Studies, University of Leicester

The museum is a platform for the curation, sharing and creation of heritage. Thinking of the museum as a platform means to conceive it as a distributed and networked organization that fosters and constantly develops a system of relationships, both physical and virtual, around cultural heritage. These relationships contribute to create diverse communities that collaborate in the curation of the material heritage that the museum hosts and also in the creation of new forms of heritage: not only objects, but also sonic and digital resources that are co-created and shared through different platforms. In so doing, the museum is a dynamic entity extended in the space - both physical and virtual - and extended in the relationships, with a process of knowledge exchange that goes from the museum to people and from people to the museum. Its physical dimension embraces the sites and buildings where material heritage is conserved and displayed, but also the landscape and geographical context to which heritage is related. Its virtual dimension includes all the online platforms and spaces where the digital resources are shared, experienced and co-created. The communities developed around the museum can be of different nature: all of them share a common interest in relation to particular aspects of its tangible, intangible or digital heritage and contribute to its curation, interpretation and ongoing development. This participatory process guarantees that the museum and its heritage will always maintain a cultural, scientific, educational and social value despite the different meanings that society may assign to them over time.

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# Facilitators of Integration?

## The Potential Role of Museums in Integration as a Two-Way Process

By Susanne Boersma

### Abstract

Museums have increasingly initiated projects that reflect on migration through a bottom-up approach, involving the affected people in the presentation of their narrative. The question of who speaks for whom is widely debated and legitimises this participatory approach of museums. The role of the museum, in this respect, aligns with the newly proposed museum definition which states that museums work ‘in active partnership with and for diverse communities’ (ICOM, 2019). This paper reflects on the impact of potentially empowering practices on forced migrants and the local population, by studying the ways in which they contribute to the integration process. It examines three selected projects that have taken place in Berlin in response to the refugee protection crisis and defines both the effective and the problematic aspects of their approaches. In light of prominent public and political discourse on migration, it is especially up to today’s museum to facilitate integration.

**Keywords:** Social Responsibility, Flight Migrants, Integration, Participation, Museums

The refugee protection crisis of 2015<sup>1</sup> sparked immediate responses from memory institutions such as museums, archives and libraries, which set out to address the stories of recent flight migrants<sup>2</sup> through exhibitions and events. Museums often adopted a participatory approach, as these practices are increasingly implemented to let ‘others’ speak for themselves. For much longer, participation in the museum – whether it is through facilitation, contribution, collaboration or co-creation, as per Nina Simon’s ‘The Participatory Museum’ (2010) – has been a tool to engage audiences differently and to engage different audiences, but is found increasingly relevant when addressing contexts that should challenge existing hierarchies (Lynch, 2017). With the representation of refugees’ heritages, museums are, once again, contextualising what is referred to as the ‘other’ as described in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said, 2007), potentially but not ideally from an outside perspective. In alignment with ICOM’s new vision of the museum as a democratising and inclusive institution<sup>3</sup>, recent participatory projects invited flight migrants to take part in presenting stories of migration for which museums

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1 The refugee protection crisis is more often referred to as just the ‘refugee crisis’ which alludes to the feeling of being overwhelmed by the high number of refugees arriving in European countries in 2015. In this paper it is referred to as the refugee protection crisis to remove the blame of this crisis from the involved migrants, by instead focussing on the crisis as a result of the inability to facilitate the arrival of over a million refugees in Europe, and reflects that the crisis was a result of a lack of management and organisation, (cf. Bock & Macdonald, 2019; Derksen, 2018; Eddy & Johannsen, 2015). The crisis especially affected Germany, as a result of Angela Merkel’s decision to open the borders for a short period of time when famously stating ‘Wir schaffen das’ (roughly translates to: we will manage) in August of 2015 (Bock & Macdonald, 2019: 2, 10) This was naturally not the beginning nor the end of people fleeing their countries in hope for a better life elsewhere, but it marks the beginning of European politics becoming more openly involved in matters of migration and border control.

2 As a result of the so-called crisis, the term ‘refugee’ has become negatively charged and is used to describe any person that seeks refuge in another country, despite them not necessarily having a ‘refugee status’ in the receiving country (to which the definition is originally linked). The term will therefore not be mentioned hereafter, with exception of citations in which the term is used; those that seek refuge will be referred to as flight migrants.

3 The new ICOM definition, as per the most recent update on ICOM’s website (December 2019) states that: ‘Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.’

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especially can provide a platform. Existing research (cf. Lynch, 2017; Whitehead et. al., 2015; Basso Peressut & Pozzi, 2012; Coffee, 2006) discusses the role of museums in representing migration and working with migrants, but often neglects the potential to foster integration and its necessity within the current political and public discourse. This paper focuses on projects with flight migrants specifically, not only because of potentially different obstacles in the integration process, but also due to the array of immediate responses by museums as a result of the aforementioned ‘crisis’. With a focus on Berlin and its situation since 2015, this paper asks: in which way can museums become most effective in acknowledging and overcoming common misunderstandings of migration and integration? What elements of existing participatory practices with flight migrants help or hinder further integration processes? These questions are addressed through an initial review of integration and people’s and politics’ understanding of this process, followed by an analysis of the changing role of museums and their corresponding approaches. Potential practices in museums are studied through two examples, *Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point*, initiated by the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* after which it extended to other Berlin State Museums, and *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* which took place at *Museum Europäischer Kulturen*. Their methods will be examined and compared to *Nachbarschaftsmuseum’s* workshop *Human Rights, Democracy, Creating Collaboratively*, an example of a project initiated from outside museums that draws on knowledge and narratives held within them. Contrary to previous studies, this paper will review these examples in the light of integrative practices and suggest which approaches are most effective to attain the goal of fostering integration through museum practices. Defining their shortcomings and drawing on their successful approaches, this paper will argue for well-considered practices within the museum and demand its continuous involvement, especially in the current political climate.

### **Integration – the role of museums?**

Integration is often – especially in political discussions – referred to as an objective rather than a process. In integration theory it is, however, described as the continuous process of

considering, negotiating and redefining ethnic pluralism, which ultimately outlines the state of modern societies (Hoesch, 2018, 121). The social integration of migrants depends on both the efforts from the receiving society as well as the efforts of those arriving in a new country; the process and the different outcomes vary from multi-level integration, with social integration at both ends, to marginalisation, which happens when the newcomer cannot integrate into the host country nor in their own ethnic community that resides there (Hoesch, 2018: 91). The arriving migrants as well as the receiving population should be informed of their shared responsibility to create an environment in which cultural exchange and mutual appreciation are encouraged. ‘Simply saying that “Germany is diverse” without explaining the tasks and requirements that accompany such heterogeneity seems to overwhelm many people.’ (Foroutan, 2015: 4) Hence, successful integration depends on the expectations of the receiving society towards the migrants and the migrant’s ability to align their expectations with the role defined by the receiving society. The failure to align expectations and demands has led to problems of segregation in more recent migration influxes (Hoesch, 2018: 89-91). The necessity to view it as a two-way process has also been acknowledged by museum professionals, however, there remains little focus on the involvement of groups described as ‘local’ by the museum (Vlachou, 2017: 81). It is difficult to determine to what extent museums can and should become involved in processes of integration, especially due to the lack of agreement on the best measures to foster these processes. A UNHCR report suggested that integration is difficult to measure, which leads to a lack of guidelines – for governments and societal actors, as well as for cultural institutions – to establish integration programmes (UNHCR, 2002: 8). Recent governmental procedures, however, provide immigrants with limited resources often aimed to achieve assimilation rather than integration (Brubaker, 2001: 538-539). The ideal “integration from below” – a kind of civil integration as civic, personal awareness of integration – can be supported by clearly linking Germany’s narrative as a heterogeneous country with the notion that adaptive efforts are also expected of those who do not have a migration background.’ (Foroutan, 2015: 6)

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Such an intercultural narrative can be promoted by museum exhibitions and collections, even if the heterogeneity of their discourse is not immediately evident. This can be supported by acknowledging (flight) migration as a historical phenomenon rather than a recent development (Vlachou, 2017: 82).

Cultural institutions could support the removal of structural barriers through participatory practices that address both those newly arrived and the local population. Further developing the framework of 'new museology' (Vergo, 1989) within current contexts, museums act upon their more recently assigned social responsibility (Janes, 2007). Museums become places of dialogue and cultural exchange through participatory projects and community engagement. The participatory approaches that follow these novel objectives are seen as a means to empower people to take control over their own engagement and representation (Kreps, 2008: 27-28). A recent text by Maria Vlachou suggests that the changes in the museum's activities, which are increasingly geared towards a possible social impact, continue to challenge the museums' roles and responsibilities. This includes the idea that the museum should be and should speak to, about and with everyone (2019: 47). The role of the museum, in this respect, aligns with the newly proposed museum definition which states that museums work 'in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world' (ICOM, 2019)<sup>4</sup>. Addressing different heritages through suggested participatory methods which engage both local communities and flight migrants – both of which are often grouped as part of the invitation process – to challenge perceptions both in- and outside of the museum walls (Lynch, 2017: 227-228). In his paper 'Post-multicultural challenges for cultural heritage managers and museums in the age of migrations', Fabio Carbone suggests

that museums can play a key role in integration processes through promotion of local heritage, of the immigrants' heritage and of the memories of migration. He addresses that heritage institutions can strengthen intercultural competences through public participation (Carbone, 2018: 11-12). With the objective of strengthening intercultural competences and a shared understanding, the involvement of both local citizens – those who have resided in Berlin for an extended amount of time – and flight migrants is paramount<sup>5</sup>. In addition to outreach- and content-related considerations, these practices can support integration through practical support. Projects in cultural institutions could provide support for flight migrants in achieving economic stability and independence, such as through employment, housing, language acquisition and financial support. Despite these practical means towards integration being easier to measure, they are only part of the integration process and difficult for museums to contribute towards. Hence, all criteria that define the potential of integrative projects will be taken into account when reflecting on recent projects in Berlin.

### **Integrative practices by museums: flight migrants as museum guides**

Museums, according to museum director Stefan Weber, provide the most suitable place for dialogue, as they provide a space in which one can ask critical questions without it becoming immediately personal. His co-director, Winkler, agrees by stating that 'museums have the immense opportunity to function as a connecting link between the refugees' countries of origin and their new host country, in order to create a context of meaning for their lives here.' (Winkler, 2016) Initiated by Weber, the project *Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point* took shape at the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* (Museum for Islamic Art) and extended to

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4 Following this definition, or rather this vision of what museums should strive to become, there is a need for museums to reconsider what these communities are, what defines them as a group and how they can be included in a way that is meaningful for them as well as for the museum. Being an institution that collects memories through objects and narratives, the museum is provided with the means to develop a mutual understanding between the receiving community and the arriving flight migrants, hence allowing these institutions to foster integration.

5 This process leads to problematic approaches in inviting so-called 'communities' to facilitate meaningful cultural exchange (cf. Mörsch, 2016). Both in the process of invitation and in representation, museums should be careful in addressing migrants and other supposed communities as a group or collective, and rather treat the involved people as individuals able to represent only their own stories. This also suggests that the involved people are equally respected, and their stories considered equally relevant in the museum space and in the relations built as part of the process.

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become part of the programme in five Berlin State Museums: *Museum für Islamische Kunst*, *Vorderasiatisches Museum* (Near East Museum), the *Skulpturensammlung* (Sculpture collection), *Museum für Byzantinische Kunst* (Museum for Byzantine Art) and *Deutsches Historisches Museum* (German History Museum, DHM). The project was developed in 2015 in response to the refugee protection crisis with the goal of bringing together people and cultures within an accessible context and a recognisable format. At the start of the project, Syrian and Iraqi flight migrants were trained to give tours in their native language; the museum's new employees were taught didactic skills as well as the 'big story' of the museum and were granted freedom to develop their own narratives to share in their tours using the objects on display within the provided context. The first number of tours were visited by a total of 15,000 flight migrants and led to intensive discussions and strong emotional responses, possibly by associations to the memories of the tour guides themselves. The project initially solely addressed flight migrants by offering tours in their native languages but was later extended to invite local speakers of English and German to hear these stories (Weber, 2019). The museum now aims to expand the project to reach beyond the group of Arabic-speaking flight migrants and going outside of the museum's established network. *Multaka* will continue to do its work for at least the next ten years and its concept has been adopted by museums internationally, but its real success lies in its potential to help achieve socio-cultural integration.

The guides themselves described it as a self-empowering experience, as they had a platform to tell their own stories in relation to cultural history (Weber, 2019). Museologist Bernadette Lynch suggested that the project has allowed Berlin museums to become 'sites of struggle for migrant populations' as they empower migrants by, quite literally, giving them a voice (2017: 239). The project addresses practical integration matters through hiring the participants as part of their team; the guides have used the project as a springboard for their lives and careers in Germany. According to the project's website, '*Multaka* should be conceived of as an opportunity to foster the growth of new structures of understanding

and acceptance in a heterogeneous and ethnically diverse society.' (Multaka, 2019) The project is set up to help both flight migrants and local citizens develop an understanding of diversity as a constant and positive notion. Through thematic links in migration, shared heritage, common threads in history, contact zones and identity, the guides are able to connect with the visitors and have the opportunity to contribute to the idea that flight is not something strange, or new, but something historical which continuously affects societies. Weber confirms this idea with his definition of 'migration as the mother of all cultures' (Weber, 2019). *Multaka* frames identity as something that is plural and always changing (Weber, 2019); in the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* this is achieved by highlighting ethnic and religious plurality, whilst in the DHM experiences of flight are contextualized within history and present-day. In the latter especially, the references to historical events serve as starting points for a conversation to reach a mutual understanding. Through this, the project fuels the feeling of being able to contribute to society and this might be the most important aspect of integration; 'after that, all the rest [the practical aspects] will follow' stated the museum director (Weber, 2019).

Though the project has had a positive impact on the participating flight migrants, the visiting flight migrants and the museum itself, it is important to address potential discrepancies in the assigned roles within this format. Weber stated in the interview that some visitors of the tours came to meet a flight migrant in real life (2019), which suggests the project possibly encouraged the differentiation between the guides and the local Germans. It brings into question how these 'other' heritages can be addressed without defining them so clearly as different. Its format and subject matter might be perceived as an irregularity because these tours exist alongside the permanent programme as an addition to the 'regular' tours through the museum. Despite its success, both in the museological realm and in its potential to foster integration, the project is not considered part of but as a parallel to the main programme of the museum. It has been set up to contribute to the problematic discourse 'as long as necessary', but this means that the end of the project will

mean the end of its visibility and perceivable impact on the institution. As such, the museum runs the risk obtaining the same views and considering the same narratives without change (Weber, 2019).

### **Extending the museum programme: flight migrants at work**

Another response to the refugee protection crisis took place in the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz* (MEK) as to provide support for those new to Berlin. The museum has reflected on migration in its exhibitions and projects since long before the sudden influx of flight migrants to Germany in 2015, so the thematisation of flight migration was in line with its strategies and practices. The presentation *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* was part of the museum's programme but was organised by Barbara Caveng as part of *KUNSTASYL* (Art Asylum), an artistic collaboration in the temporary home of flight migrants in Berlin-Spandau. The workshop-type process of exhibition-making ran from 4 March until 2 July 2016 during which the museum took on the role of facility manager (Tietmeyer, 2019). After initial sessions between museum staff and project participants that took place at the MEK and in *KUNSTASYL*, the flight migrants, with support of Caveng, took over the exhibition spaces to tell their story. Alongside the presentation of the group of flight migrants, the museum wanted to elaborate on the history of migration. This would highlight that migration did not start there and then but is part of European and world history and should be presented as such (Tietmeyer, 2019). Through this historical narrative, the museum pointed towards the heterogeneity of the German population and extending it to the online realm demonstrated the museum's disagreement with the dominant conviction of migrants and migration in political and media discourse. Acknowledging the discrepancy between on the one hand, the critique on Europe, and on the other hand, the idea of 'Fortress Europe' that needs to be guarded from all 'threats' from outside, taking a political stance was inevitable (Tietmeyer, 2019).

'What started in a home (Heim) became possible in the

museum: Heim became *daHEIM* (at home) – a fragile construct of glances into fugitive lives.' (Caveng, 2017: 11) This was empowering for the participants, who started to refer to the MEK as 'their museum' and approached their participation as a job when stating they 'had to go to work' (Tietmeyer, 2019). The aforementioned Lynch addressed the exhibition as exemplary of non-hierarchical practices in museums, as she said: 'There is no evasion of the difficulties, the challenges past and present, in these stories, and great power in being personally in control of telling them to others.' (2017: 239) According to Lynch, the museum did not assume a paternalistic approach of participation, but instead gave room for autonomy. The participants were paid by the museum as they turned the institution into a place for current themes and topics relevant to them personally. Additionally, the museum supported the flight migrants to find housing, it helped them find jobs or apply for further education, and the project sparked the idea of pursuing an Art Degree for one of the participants. For most of the involved flight migrants, the project made room for considering their ambitions, their opportunities and their role in the place that was their new home. It brought together people from Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq who had made their way to Germany for different reasons. *Glances into Fugitive Lives* involved museum visitors, other recent migrants and support organisations through the programme that ran alongside the exhibition. These were the events that did allow for conversations between locals and the involved flight migrants, facilitating part of the process of social integration. Despite these events, the museum risks the continuation of the dominant understanding of integration as the responsibility of the flight migrants rather than the receiving society. The project strongly focussed on stories of migration but did not allow for an in-depth introduction to the heritage of those involved. It invited participation of flight migrants but did not actively involve local Germans, or so-called 'Bio-Deutscher' (Tietmeyer, 2019). However, during the process the space was accessible for (German) visitors, who could walk in and out as the exhibition took shape through a collaborative process of the group. On the one hand, this could be seen as a positive and transparent aspect which allows for interaction, whilst on

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the other hand, it could point towards a separation between the flight migrants – at work in the museum – and the museum visitors. The museum's contribution historicised migration, whilst at the same time it made a distinction between what was done by those invited in to transform the museum spaces and what was produced by the museum staff. The project was part of the museum's programme whilst at the same time being clearly framed as a take-over by *KUNSTASYL*. In these ways, the museum communicated a distance between itself and the project; a safe distance in case of critique, as well as a visible and physical gap between the migrants and the visitors and museum staff.

### **Integrative practices drawing on different museums**

The aforementioned practices are examples of projects initiated by museums to fit within their frameworks, their known formats and their clearly defined approaches. These projects took the shape of a programme of guided tours or a museum exhibition accompanied by events; their objectives to develop a visible and representative outcome may have defined the format as well as the potential outcomes of the project. The moderated workshop *Human Rights, Democracy, Creating Collaboratively* draws on 'new museology' (Vergo, 1989) as well as pedagogy, and uses the knowledge and narrative represented in cultural institutions as a starting point. Its initiator Rita Klages suggests that its small scale and its disregard for the public presentation of potential outcomes make it free from museums' relatively formal approaches (Klages, 2019). The workshop, which ran from February until December 2019, is part of a series of workshops developed in 2015 with the ambition to further integrate newly arrived flight migrants<sup>6</sup>. This project is organised by the Berlin-based *Nachbarschaftsmuseum* (Neighbourhood Museum), founded by Rita Klages in 1991, which is no physical museum, but rather connects to and elaborates on the offer of museums and other cultural institutions. As such, Klages acknowledges the social significance of museums as places for intercultural dialogue (Klages, 2019). Taking place in different locations across Berlin, the participants engage

with different aspects of the city, its history and the people that live there. Each session focuses on a specific theme, first introduced in a tour, presentation or discussion led by experts from the hosting cultural institution or aid organisation. On this basis, participants are invited to ask questions and discuss, often drawing connections between German history and the situation in their home countries. The exchanges were quicker and more urgent when there was a degree of recognition with the participants; the knowledge of certain feelings or constraints experienced in other countries being similar to past experiences of people in Germany provided a sense of comfort and security. The visit to the *Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand* (Memorial to the German Resistance), for instance, opened up a conversation about discrimination as the drive of World War II but also as something that still needs to be challenged today. All workshops are in German, Arabic and Turkish (upon request) and the group of flight migrants and a small number of locals changes and evolves over time (Nachbarschaftsmuseum, 2019).

Moving beyond the help provided by refugee aid organisations, the workshop participants learn about their rights as citizens of Berlin through themes addressed by cultural organisations, discussed in their own language. According to Klages, the workshop empowers the participants through introductions to relevant topics, engaging them in conversation and actively inviting contributions. This method gives the participants agency and develops a sense of belonging (Klages, 2019). The pedagogical format allows for the participants to gain insight into cultural and historical similarities and differences, and how they have shaped society both locally and nationally. The project has developed a community of flight migrants and German citizens that engage in conversation about events of the past and the present. As such, the workshop helps build connections and fosters an intercultural understanding between participating flight migrants and local citizens. However, it does require a lot of effort and continuous outreach to engage these so-called 'Ur-Berliner' – native inhabitants of Berlin as described by Klages – in the project.

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<sup>6</sup> This workshop followed the workshop entitled 'Multiplicity of perspectives in the dialogue of co-existing'. The next workshop in the series started in February 2020 and is entitled 'Empowering: encountering – learning – participating'.

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This demonstrates the difficulties many projects face when wanting to involve local citizens more actively: their time is limited, and their involvement is dependent on a willingness to learn about those new to the city. Despite these hurdles, the project is an example of how flight migrants, locals and cultural institutions could be engaged in the integration process collaboratively, though on a small and intimate scale. Through this project, the participants learn about the potential opportunities to engage in cultural activities in Berlin. Some of the participants, for example, have become involved in a project in Berlin's *Naturkundemuseum* (Natural History Museum). The workshop does not only draw on the content presented in museums and the phenomena addressed, but it creates a network of those involved as participants and as hosts.

*Nachbarschaftsmuseum's* approach has proven to be very different to the discussed formats provided by museums themselves. Positioned outside of the institutional realm, it is granted the freedom of having a clear focus on integration and community, whilst being presented with the lack of an established local audience to involve in the project. The initiative has undoubtedly been very helpful for its participants – the series of workshops has been running since 2015 and has seen many participants over time as they found their feet in Berlin – but its approach is ultimately pedagogical and leaves limited space for autonomy as part of the programme. Though the project draws on the content of museums it is not easily translated to a museum context as a whole. However, the project bridges the gap between integration programmes and creative initiatives driven by flight migrants themselves.

### **Meeting in the middle: the future of integrative practices in museums**

The discussed examples have demonstrated the relevance of museum work in engaging local citizens as well as flight migrants in conversation to enhance the process of integration. Dependent on many different factors and faced by challenges of participation and communication, the projects' ability to foster integration is not easily revealed; the success of these projects cannot be measured but their

potential should be further discussed and experimented with. Based on the described understanding of integration, there is, however, an apparent role for cultural institutions in the removal of structural barriers between segregated communities, or perhaps rather social and cultural groups and individuals. In light of current media and political discourses and their negative effect on the public understanding of flight migration, it is also up to museums as cultural institutions to enhance understanding of both the incoming flight migrants and the receiving population.

The projects studied in this paper have shown that museums and connected organisations can help foster a sense of belonging for and of flight migrants that have newly arrived in a country. With their exhibitions and collections, museums have the tools to represent a place (in this case: Berlin) as heterogeneous and to actively introduce participants and visitors to different heritages. The institutions make up the ideal surroundings to discuss historical struggles and relations, and to find connections between accounts of the past and those affecting us today. The projects *Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point*, *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* and the workshop *Human Rights, Democracy, Creating Collaboratively* meet different criteria of integrative participatory projects. Within institutional contexts, projects are shaped by traditional approaches, existing frameworks and the hierarchies in place, but this does not have to negatively affect their potential outcome. Moving beyond the institutional framework and potentially contradicting political viewpoints, museums can develop projects that address and foster integration as a two-way process. As such, they can 'work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to (...) enhance understandings of the world' (ICOM, 2019).

This study only considers a small sample of the numerous projects that have taken place across Europe in response to the refugee protection crisis, most of which lacked an understanding of the difficulties of dealing with flight migrants' heritages and of presenting these heritages within the institutional realm. but it does address which aspects of their approaches can be considered successful and which ones



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(at the same time) questionable. Different elements from their practices have shown to foster integration of local citizens and flight migrants, whereas other elements separate museums and their local history from the heritages of flight migrants. Taking these projects and their successful elements as a basis for novel approaches, however, can shape practices in museums that serve the goal of integration of local communities and those newly arrived. This study points towards potential improvements of such participatory projects for integration: museums could increase their impact by bridging the gap between institutional practices and migration narratives or by questioning the invitation process and prioritising the involvement of local citizens. The successes of the discussed projects should not be seen to mark the final stage of their development towards effective and sustainable practices. These recommendations can be taken into account for the projects that are to follow. The involvement of museums in tackling the challenges of integration processes are becoming increasingly necessary, especially due to further divides in public and political opinion.

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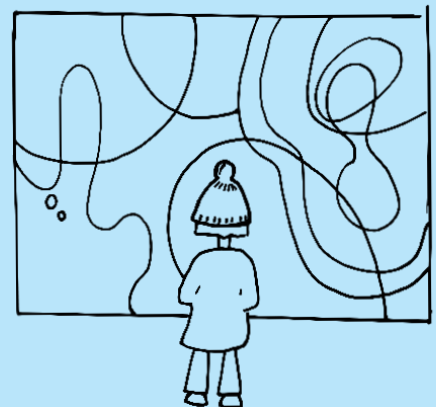
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To quantify and reduce the multi-faceted functions and aspects of a museum to one definition is no small feat. From wunderkammern to the contested “Museum” of Ice Cream, the term and implications of the Western idea of a museum have evolved, growing over time. However, this does not always mean changing in a way or at a pace that is positively received by others. Despite the questionable past encompassing museum history and collecting activities, the aspirational and inspirational nature of museums are pushing them forward and society pushes back, shaping them in turn. As we move forward, to be truly beneficial to the audiences we serve, we can aim to be more reflective of those audiences.

- Museums are aspirationally democratic institutions that have a general mission to collect and interpret objects or ideas for education, study, research, and enjoyment. They aim to provide access to objects and information while acting as guardians, preserving collections and facts to ensure that their missions can be carried out for future generations for the benefit of humanity.

- Museums are adapting to be more responsive and to examine the ethics of their actions but must aggressively hold themselves to the highest standard of morality and transparency.

- Museums offer important objects, ideas, and spaces to their audiences and society, but they must work on making these more accessible.

- Museums are beginning to look inward to create a more equitable workplace while attempting to foster a more equitable, educated, and free world through their institutional efforts to be more reflective of their audiences.

- Nonprofit and for-profit institutions both are using the descriptor, “museum.” Nonprofit museums differ with their collections being in the public trust.

- As stewards, we can assist in the evolution of these institutions by acknowledging the present state of them and indicating future directions in our definitions.

**Shannon Nortz**, Sole Proprietor, SN Musæum Methods

# Visitor Engagement with the Temporary Photography Exhibition The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt at the National Museum of Iceland

By Katla Kjartansdóttir

## Abstract

Museums have frequently been described as important contact zones where encounters between diverse cultures and social groups can take place. In this article, I approach the National Museum of Iceland as a contact zone and a museum space with an explicit public mission to act as a forum for inclusion, social justice, broadmindedness and information about diversity. I examine, in particular, how a diverse group of thirteen visitors respond to the temporary photo exhibition The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt, launched in January 2018 at the National Museum of Iceland. The exhibition engaged with issues of human mobility through visual material and text. The main research question was: how do visitors with diverse social and cultural backgrounds respond to the theme of the exhibition and the visual material. The aim was partly to examine if and how negative discourses, image and the somewhat bad reputation of the Breiðholt area, where all the photographs in the exhibition were taken, influenced the perceptions of my informants. The investigation reveals how the exhibition affirmed, for many of my informants, their rather negative views on the area and how the material underpinned their opinions on immigrants as an isolated and marginalized group in Icelandic society. However, the exhibition also managed to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and evoke feelings of empathy among some of my informants through an emphasis on personal belongings, individual faces, home interiors and intimacy.

**Keywords:** Museums, Mobility, Migration, Affective Encounters, Visitor Engagement

In recent years, migration, immigration and mobility have continued to develop as points of enquiry within the field of museum studies. This article is situated within theoretical discussions on the integration of migration issues in museums and, in particular, visitor engagement with themes related to migration. The article examines and verifies these discussions through fieldwork based on the analysis of a temporary photography exhibition titled The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt, which was exhibited at the National Museum of Iceland from January 2018 through July 2018<sup>1</sup>. The exhibition was a collaborative project between the National Museum of Iceland and the photographer David

Barreiro who describes himself in the exhibition catalogue as an immigrant in Iceland. In an interview and in the catalogue, Barreiro explained how his status as an immigrant in Iceland as well as his upbringing and personal experiences influenced his photography project on the apartment block in Upper-Breiðholt<sup>2</sup>.

The exhibition engaged with themes such as everyday life, mobility, personal narratives, material culture and belonging while focusing on the cultural and personal identities of a diverse group of individuals (four men, four women and five children) who all live in the same apartment building in the

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1 As stated by Jónsdóttir, the former head of communication and public programs at the National Museum of Iceland, the exhibition and its theme was framed within the general museum policy of the National Museum of Iceland published in 2017, in particular its emphasis on inclusion, social justice, broadmindedness and diversity. According to Jónsdóttir, the aim of the exhibition was also to reach out to attract a more diverse group of visitors to the museum. Interview with Jónsdóttir, March 8th, 2018.

2 Interview with Barreiro, January 19th 2018. Parts of the exhibition catalogue are still available on this webpage: <https://www.breidholt.com/the-block>, accessed 19 September 2019. The webpage also states that the catalogue won first prize in the book design category by the Association of Icelandic Graphic Designers.

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Upper-Breiðholt area in Iceland and share the experience of moving to Iceland from another country<sup>3</sup>. The discourse in Iceland regarding the Upper-Breiðholt area has, through the years, been linked with complex societal challenges and poverty<sup>4</sup>. The main aim of my research was to find out if and how this discourse and rather negative image influenced the perceptions of my informants, and if and how the exhibition managed to change their ideas. The analysis is a response to the call for further research regarding visitors with migrant backgrounds, audience engagement with migrant themes and migrants as producers of museum experiences.

### Methodology

The exhibition was launched in January 2018 and lasted until June 2018. During this period, a range of data was gathered using a bricolage approach. This approach comprises methods such as open and semi-structured interviews, observations at the National Museum of Iceland during the exhibition and mixed methods of critical visual analysis (Leavy, 2014; Rose, 2016). Interviews were conducted with the head of communication and public programs at the National Museum of Iceland and the photographer, David Barreiro, who explained his artistic approach in relation to the photographs and the exhibition. Thirteen individuals with diverse social and cultural backgrounds, but all currently living in Iceland, also visited the exhibition and participated in my research<sup>5</sup>.

The group of thirteen participants was instructed to answer

three questions after they visited the exhibition. The questions were open-ended, as my aim was to give the visitors space to contemplate and describe their attitudes, thoughts and emotional engagement with the exhibition and its theme in their own words. Questions were sent and answered either through e-mail or Facebook messages. To begin with, I interviewed my informants in their homes or at the museum café after walking with them through the exhibition. Later, I decided to give them more time and space to contemplate the material on their own and formulate the answers to my questions. I therefore asked them to send me their answers in written form after visiting the exhibition. When referring to my informants' answers, I use their own words and phrasing<sup>6</sup>.

As a first question, I asked all of my participants to describe what sorts of images of immigrants the exhibition was representing. Secondly, I asked if the exhibition changed or affirmed their views on immigrants in Iceland. Finally, I asked them to describe the thoughts and emotions that the exhibition evoked for them. In the latter half of the article, the main focus is on these visitors' views and different responses regarding the exhibition. I use Icelandic pseudonyms for all of the participants and do not identify their country of origin for those with migrant backgrounds who are currently living in Iceland in order for my informants to remain anonymous and, thus, be able to speak more freely. I am very grateful to all my participants for their valuable contributions.

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3 The building itself, often referred to by locals as Langavitleysa, plays a large role in the exhibition and in a number of photographs, the main focus is on the architecture of the building and its surroundings. As described by Sigrún (Icelandic, female and a former resident of the building), the nickname Langavitleysa fits very well. It refers to a certain card game that has the same name, and in a way, it describes something that is endless but also a bit silly or stupid because langa means long and vitleysa means stupid things or stupidity. For her, the building seemed endless, especially when she was a small kid.

4 The percentage of immigrants (first and second generation) in the Upper-Breiðholt area in January 2018 was 34% according to Statistics in Iceland: [https://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/lbuar/lbuar\\_\\_mannfjoldi\\_\\_3\\_bakgrunnur\\_\\_Uppruni/MAN43006.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=eccc863c-bae8-4ea2-b11c-e555efe9e2c6](https://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/lbuar/lbuar__mannfjoldi__3_bakgrunnur__Uppruni/MAN43006.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=eccc863c-bae8-4ea2-b11c-e555efe9e2c6), accessed 18 September 2019. In 2016, the Red Cross of Iceland published a report titled *The People in the Shadows* on the status of the Breiðholt area in relation to immigration, educational level and poverty. The report is no longer available (e-mail correspondence with the Red Cross in Iceland, 18.09.2019) but an example on how the report was discussed in Icelandic media is still available: [borgarbld.is/2016/11/25/uppfull-af-neikvaedni-um-breidholt/](http://borgarbld.is/2016/11/25/uppfull-af-neikvaedni-um-breidholt/), accessed 18 September 2019. The article "Full of Negativity about Breiðholt" (translation by author), shows how controversial the report was and how it was criticized, for instance, by inhabitants of the area and a member of the Icelandic parliament of foreign origin for describing the Breiðholt area too negatively.

5 I handpicked these participants as my aim was to achieve breadth and inclusiveness regarding age, gender and cultural and social background. In my group of visitors, I included five individuals who have moved to Iceland from another country for education, work or personal reasons, two men and three women. The group of Icelandic participants was made up of six women and two men. My informants were aged between 23 and 65 years. As the exhibition period was only from January to June of 2018, the time frame of the study was quite tight.

6 When I refer to my informants I do not correct their grammar or spelling in any way.

### Museums, mobility and migration – Theoretical context

The research focus of museum studies has increasingly turned toward transnational narratives, cross-cultural entanglements, multi-layered identities and a complex sense of belonging. Recent studies suggest that migration is no longer perceived as an abnormality or exception but as an integral or naturalized part of everyday life, which has influenced, and will continue to influence, most societies around the globe. The theme of migration has become a pressing matter for museums (e.g. Dibbitts and Karrouche, 2017). The 21st century has even been defined as the ‘age of migration’ (Castles and Miller, 2009) and the ‘age of global mobility’ (Levin, 2017). These social, economic and cultural developments have spurred museums to re-evaluate their societal role and practices. Museums have increasingly been described as agents of social change (Sandell, 1998; 2002; 2007) charged with influencing visitor attitudes (Sandell and Nightengale, 2012) and zones of contact (Pratt, 1992; Clifford, 1997) where cultural flows and encounters continually take place (e.g. Poehls, 2011; Mason, 2013; Petersen, 2017).<sup>7</sup>

The phenomena of intensified migration and globalization, which characterize the world today, can present new challenges for representation (e.g. Whitehead et al. 2015; Levin, 2017; Petersen and Schramm, 2017; Dibbitts and Karrouche, 2017). In this regard, the arts and culture have a very important role to play as active contributors (Petersen and Schramm, 2017; Basso Peressut and Montanari, 2017)<sup>8</sup>. In my analysis, I highlight visual artistic material and approaches as effective tools for raising critical questions and discussions regarding these urgent matters of our contemporary times. Contemporary cultural heritage museums around the world

have increasingly been addressing complex questions on human mobility while experimenting with the new curatorial practices of co-curating, participative collecting, international interdisciplinary networking and artistic co-operations (e.g. Poehls, 2011; Lanz 2016; Levin, 2017), as was the case in relation to the photo exhibition *The Long Apartment Block* in Upper-Breiðholt<sup>9</sup>. As pointed out by Witcomb (2013), Schorch (2015), Levin (2017), Bounia (2017) and Swensen (2017), limited consideration has been given to the ways in which visitors actually engage with museum exhibitions related to global and regional mobility, especially to the cultures of immigrants and migrants.

Taking this cue from Witcomb (2013), Schorch (2015), Levin (2017), Bounia (2017) and Swensen (2017), I focus especially on visitor engagement with the visual material and individual views and thoughts on *The Long Apartment Block* in Upper-Breiðholt and examine how a diverse group of visitors responded to the exhibition. The aim was partly to examine how prior opinions (Falk, 2009; 2016) and intellectual baggage (Leshchenko, 2016) influenced their perceptions, but also if and how the exhibition managed to change their views about immigrants in Iceland<sup>10</sup>. The investigation offers insight into how a mixed group of thirteen visitors perceived the exhibition after they had had a few days to contemplate the material and the questions I had sent.

### Prior Views and Visitor Responses

For my group of participants, the exhibition clearly generated a range of positive and negative emotions. Some of them felt that the exhibition changed their preconceived ideas about immigrants in Iceland while for others it affirmed their preconceptions. Emotions such as sadness and anger were, for

<sup>7</sup> Sandell (2012; 2017) also notes that museums can bridge societal isolation and foster an understanding of marginalised populations.

<sup>8</sup> Recent EU-funded research projects such as MeLa (European Museums in an Age of Migrations): <http://www.mela-project.polimi.it/>, accessed 3 March 2020 are related. This project, which ended in 2015, analyzed the challenges and the opportunities emerging from processes of globalization, enhanced mobility and contemporary migrations. It also highlighted the importance of innovative exhibition practices and artistic collaborations in relation to museum representation of identities affected by the fluidity of transcultural and transnational subjectivity (see also Basso Peressut and Montanari, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Another exhibition on mobility, cross-cultural entanglements, emigration and immigration was also recently launched (2016) at the National Museum of Iceland in collaboration with Icelandic designers and the University of Iceland ([thjodminjasafn.is/stofnunin/um-safnid/frettir/island-i-heiminum-heimurinn-i-islandi-1](http://thjodminjasafn.is/stofnunin/um-safnid/frettir/island-i-heiminum-heimurinn-i-islandi-1), accessed 17 October 2019). To some extent the National Museum of Iceland thus also seems to be taking part in these recent developments within the museum world.

<sup>10</sup> In my analysis I focus on the emotional responses of my informants and how they describe, in their own words, their feelings shortly after visiting the exhibition. I am thus not focusing on their immediate emotions but rather their thoughts and feelings after some contemplation on the visual material.

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instance, mentioned along with curiosity, surprise, acceptance and thoughtfulness. Many of my informants also mentioned warm emotions, such as empathy, pride, gratitude and compassion. Þuríður (Icelandic, female, 45 – 55), for instance, stated: ‘These people on the pictures are obviously just trying, like everybody else, to make a home for themselves, to bring up their children and surround themselves with nice things that they personally like.’

The emphasis on individual faces, personal narratives and private belongings seemed to evoke an emotional response that included empathy in her case. A number of my other informants mentioned how strongly they were affected by the intimacy of the photographs. Many of my participants mentioned that the closeness to the individuals and their serious facial expressions somehow made them feel a bit sad. This is in line with Witcomb’s (2009; 2013) discussion on museums as prime sites for affective responses as the exhibition clearly affected their emotional states.



Figure 1: The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt.

Photograph © David Barreiro

Styrmir (migrant, male, 35 – 45) even stated: ‘What strikes me also is that most of them are not smiling, as if their moods somehow reflected their socio-economic condition (lack of economic and relational capital, and maybe juridical capital too).’ Another informant, Lína (Icelandic, female, 25-35), also commented on how the serious facial expressions of the individuals in the photographs influenced her perception and even her emotional state:

*‘I felt that many of the photos were cool, but I have to admit that I was disappointed [emphasis by author] because I felt that the exhibition only confirmed stereotypes about immigrants in Iceland – their situation and the idea about us and others and, to be honest, not portraying immigrants from a positive perspective. But maybe it is not positive to be an immigrant in Iceland and maybe this marginalization needs to be put in the spotlight for something to happen. Therefore, I was rather sad after the exhibition and puzzled by the situation of immigrants in Iceland.’*

The reflections from Þuríður, Lína and Styrmir can be seen as examples of how the material managed to emotionally touch my informants through its emphasis on individuals and their serious facial expressions. Their responses also show how the photographs made them think critically about the current social situation of immigrants in Iceland and how they evoked empathy and feelings of sameness. For other participants, some of the photographs evoked feelings of otherness. The exhibition managed to evoke quite diverse, and sometimes conflicting, emotions among the mixed group of participants as well as feelings of both sameness and otherness, as will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

The focus on home interiors and serious facial expressions influenced my informants in quite different ways. One of my participants, Halldór (Male, Icelandic, 35-45), also mentioned ‘the dour face’ expressions. In his case, this approach did not seem to evoke any emphatic feelings. Rather, the photographs seemed to have a negative impact on his emotional state. For him, the exhibition was ‘a lost chance’, and it reminded him of something similar he had seen somewhere before. For



Figure 2: The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt.

Photograph © David Barreiro

As described by Falk (2009; 2016), visitors' prior experiences, knowledge, interests and intellectual baggage (Leshchenko, 2016) profoundly influence what visitors actually do and think about within the museum. Falk (2016, p. 84) has also described how a large number of visitors arrive at museums with preconceived expectations and then use the museum to satisfy those expectations. The discourse in Iceland regarding the Upper-Breiðholt area, where the building is situated, has, through the years, been linked with various societal challenges and poverty. The responses from a number of my participants shed light on how discourses of this kind and the resultant negative image of the Breiðholt area influenced their perceptions of the exhibition.

Asked if the exhibition changed or affirmed her ideas about immigrants in Iceland, Sveinbjörg (Icelandic, female, 35-45) explained that, although the exhibition represented, in her view, a diverse group of individuals, it also affirmed her ideas about immigrants as a rather isolated and fenced off group in Icelandic society. In this respect, she commented quite dramatically that, 'the building even looks a bit like a prison!' (Sveinbjörg) and she seemed a bit disappointed. Another

visitor, Anna (female, currently living in Iceland, 35-45), was of a similar opinion when asked about her views:

*'I think the exhibition affirms [emphasis by author] immigrant culture. We are invited to get to know the immigrant person and their culture, their home, the way they live. In the society that focuses so much on 'adapting' to Icelandic culture, the message seems to be 'Get to know something about your immigrants culture...'*

For Anna, the exhibition seemed to be conveying information about immigrants and their cultures by inviting the viewer into their homes. However, the exhibition failed somewhat as it did not manage to change any of her preconceived ideas about immigrants in Iceland. Instead, she said that it affirmed immigrant culture as 'different' and immigrants as isolated or 'fenced off' in Icelandic society.

Stefanía (immigrant in Iceland, female and a former resident of the building, 20-25) also stated that, for her, it was not surprising that the Breiðholt area was being associated with immigrants, thus indicating that she had some prior ideas regarding the association between immigrants and Breiðholt. When I asked Stefanía about her feelings and thoughts in relation to the exhibition, she mentioned having warm feelings towards the residents, and she expressed her gratitude in relation to the exhibition and how pleased she was to see a photography exhibition in the National Museum of Iceland about immigrants that was also made by an immigrant in Iceland. Klara and Einar discussed how the photo exhibition affirmed their prior ideas regarding immigrants in Iceland as a rather excluded and/or marginalized group. As Einar (male, immigrant in Iceland, 20-25) explained in his answer, he was quite concerned about the status of immigrants in Icelandic society:

*This exhibition confirmed a lot of the ideas I came up with in recent times. Iceland seems to be a country where social welfare has no relevant struggles. However, behind the peacefulness of a country where social problems are radically lower as compared to other parts of the world, it lays a problem of marginalization.*



This quote highlights how the photographs evoked critical thoughts on the current social situations and marginal status of immigrants in Iceland. When asked about what sort of image of immigrants he thought the exhibition was representing, Einar stated that:

*'In my opinion, the images influence the idea of a life in which there's no glorification of successful integration, but neither an idea of dramatic marginalization. It seems to lead to the idea of Iceland as a country where building a life for immigrants is possible, but in which a delimitation from the Icelandic culture is always present.'*

Delimitations, discrimination and othering processes were recurrent themes mentioned by my group of visitors. It is also worth highlighting how Sveinbjörg, Anna, Klara and Einar describe, in a rather similar way, their image of immigrants in Iceland as being 'isolated', 'marginalized', 'excluded' and 'not accepted as a valued resource' in Icelandic society. They also expressed very similar views on 'the restrictiveness of Icelandic society' while describing their ideas about cultural 'borders' and the difficulties immigrants in Iceland can face in relation to assimilation and adaptation.



Figure 3: The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt.

Photograph © David Barreiro

Other respondents stated, in line with Falk's (2016) and Leshchenko's (2016) discussions on previous knowledge and preconceived expectations, that their prior knowledge, ideas and rather negative thoughts about the Upper-Breiðholt area inevitably influenced their attitudes and perceptions of the exhibition. Einar mentioned that:

*'The stigma of living in Breiðholt is [...] still a thing in Iceland, even me as a foreigner knows about the bad 'neighbourhood' which is not even a true fact.'*

Klara (female, immigrant in Iceland, 25-35) also mentioned her prior knowledge and ideas about the Breiðholt area and how these ideas influenced her perception of the exhibition.

I think it pretty much affirms [emphasis by author] my ideas about immigrants in Iceland. Since I moved to Iceland, Breiðholt was pictured to me as the ghetto [emphasis by author], where most immigrants, especially from east of Europe, would have lived.

Another Icelandic informant, Gerður, declared that the exhibition clearly highlighted some sort of a 'ghetto feeling' with an aura of 'otherness' that immediately struck her. In this respect, she stated: 'I think that the exhibition is affirming certain stereotypes about immigrants in Iceland living in Breiðholt, or a certain neighbourhood, in a certain building and are thus not part of 'Icelanders' [...] they are somehow portrayed like 'others' in the exhibition.' Styrmir commented on this as well by saying that, 'the exhibition presents the image of migrants who bring their practices and cultural horizons within the walls of an impersonal block in a neighbourhood that has the reputation of being a ghetto for the poor and/or migrants.' He also discussed how the exhibition seemed to underpin the idea that immigrants are somehow isolated. 'The pictures do not show migrants sharing their specificity, nor make it actually interact with 'majority society' or with others among the block's residents.'

To emphasize his point even more, Styrmir then added:

*‘So, on the one hand, these pictures give insight into the humanity of these persons – their backgrounds, aesthetic tastes, practices of the living space, aspirations, hobbies, and thus bring the observer closer to migrants, who are portrayed as normal persons who in the pictures are sharing their space of intimacy (a home). On the other hand, these pictures also resemble the idea of a migrant who does not fully belong [emphasis by author], nor participate in Icelandic society, if not as recipient of both social housing and of discriminatory processes targeting them as Others [emphasis by author] and underprivileged.’*

His interpretation gives insight into how the material managed to generate diverse and somewhat conflicting responses, how the intimacy in the photographs brought the observer closer to migrants but also how it evoked critical thoughts in relation to this particular representation and contextualization of ‘immigrants in Iceland’ as not fully belonging or participating in Icelandic society.

Many of my informants discussed, in a similar way, how the exhibition seemed to emphasize the isolation of immigrants in Iceland, and a number of them expressed concerns about how the exhibition might take part in affirming ideas about immigrants as being excluded in Icelandic society and/or as others of some kind. Styrmir said: ‘They appear almost closed within the walls of their flats [...] These persons indeed seem not really in contact with Icelandic society.’ My participants continually mentioned ideas about immigrants as isolated and not fully belonging to the Icelandic community. For Lína, Einar, Sveinbjörg, Stefanía, Styrmir, Klara, and Gerður, the exhibition affirmed their preconception of immigrants in Iceland as a marginalized or isolated group in Icelandic society, similar to what is discussed in Falk (2009; 2016) and Leshchenko (2016). The exhibition also seemed to affirm their preconceptions about the Upper-Breiðholt area as a ‘ghetto’, to use the phrasing of several of my informants.

### **Sameness/Otherness**

Many of my participants, however, stated that the exhibition gave them new ideas in relation to immigrants and their status in Icelandic society. Hildur, for instance stated: ‘The discussion

in the media is often negative about people/immigrants that are not allowed to stay in Iceland, so that has maybe affected my ideas. Therefore, I think that the exhibition has rather given me new ideas.’ For Þuríður, the exhibition mainly showed a diverse group of individuals: men, women, young, old, etc. ‘that, in a way, could be anywhere or from anywhere.’ She stated that ‘they just happen to live in the same large building in Iceland and are obviously just trying to make a warm home in our cold country.’



Figure 4: The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt.

Photograph © David Barreiro

For Þuríður, the exhibition generated rather warm feelings towards immigrants in Iceland while giving her some new information about their status, personal identities, material culture and living conditions. When focusing on some of the women in the photographs, their personal belongings and the interiors of their apartments (Fig. 4), she stated that ‘some of these objects, for example the curtains and the fake flowers, could have been part of my old grandmothers house in the Westfjords’, thus indicating a feeling of sameness or recognition of commonalities. Lína (Icelandic, female, 25-35), however, mentioned that the interiors and personal belongings shown in the photographs added to the feeling of otherness, as some of the items were strongly associated with the individual’s country of origin:

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*'I found the photos of the interior confirm the image that immigrants are different from 'Icelanders.' The taste, uses of colours, uses of material and furnishing were very different from what I have seen in 'Icelandic' homes and the glossy images of Icelandic homes published in the media.'*

For Lína, the material culture in the photographs affirmed her prior ideas of immigrants and their tastes as different. Hildur also commented on the interiors, describing them as a bit different and unlike what she is used to seeing in the homes of her friends or family:

*'When I looked at the surroundings/inventory in the photos, I experienced exoticism– something foreign. It is not like my home or the home of the people that I know.'*

These responses, especially from Þuríður, are in line with Witcomb's (2009) argument on how feelings of empathy can be evoked by focusing on personal belongings and home settings. The reflections from Þuríður, Lína and Hildur also show how the photographs managed to evoke diverse, and sometimes conflicting, feelings of otherness, sameness and empathy by focusing on personal objects and private spaces within the home. For Halldór (Icelandic, male, 35-45), this approach did not seem to evoke an empathetic response of compassion or understanding. In his answer to my first question he stated rather frankly that:

*'I admit that I was prejudiced when I looked at the photos. All of the people were foreign in my eyes. I automatically stamped the people. 'This guy is Polish' etc.'*

It is interesting to note here how he describes his own reactions as being prejudiced, how he describes the people on the photographs as foreign and his automatic reaction of pigeonholing them. In relation to the question regarding his thoughts and feelings, he said: 'I didn't get any ideas or strong emotions.'

For many of my participants, the exhibition did evoke quite strong and diverse emotional responses. When asked about his

emotions, one of my participants replied with 'curiosity, anger, acceptance, thoughtfulness'. A number of them seemed to be worried about how the exhibition might underscore negative attitudes towards immigrants in Iceland or people living in the Breiðholt area in general. Anna was, for instance, concerned about the focus on the trash shown in some of the photos: 'We got worse trash situations in the backyards of Vesturbær for instance. The context of showing trash seems very risqué and not thought through.' Her answers demonstrate how the material managed to evoke critical thoughts and concern regarding the subject. When asked further about her thoughts and emotions in relation to the exhibition, Anna explained her somewhat mixed emotions. 'I feel gratitude about giving immigrants a place. I'm bored about the architecture part and not interested in surrounding, it doesn't say anything new or interesting.' In addition, Anna stated that:

*'Architecture part [of the exhibition] is about [a] 320 meters block which is some sort of Soviet-like dream of cheap housing that become a social nightmare, gives the notion about poverty, which is unnecessary [in the exhibition]. It's just some different issue that doesn't add to the immigrant portraits that are very interesting in itself.'*



Figure 5: The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt.

Photograph © David Barreiro

## Museological Review

In conclusion, Anna explained her critical thoughts on the exhibition: 'I think curating part of the show is weak. I think the show is trying to say too much and to be too many different things.' For her, the exhibition also seemed to be rather disappointing and she viewed it as a lost chance to deal with immigrant issues in depth and with more respect for the subjects. In her case, the exhibition also managed to trigger a wide range of positive and negative feelings. It evoked warm emotions of gratitude about giving immigrants a place in Icelandic society but then she was also a bit bored and seemed to be quite disturbed by what she perceived to be negative undertones, such as trash, poverty and cheap housing.



Figure 6: The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt.

Photograph © David Barreiro

## Concluding Remarks

The wide range of emotional responses, thoughts and comments indicates how the exhibition managed to generate quite diverse, and sometimes conflicting, feelings, ideas and attitudes among my informants. For seven of the thirteen visitors, it seemed to affirm rather negative ideas about the Breiðholt area, immigrants as an isolated group in Icelandic society and their cultures as different. For five of the thirteen, the exhibition also generated understanding and positive feelings such as warmth, sameness, empathy, pride and

gratitude. In addition, the analysis gives insight into how the artistic approach of the exhibition evoked quite critical thoughts among all of my informants regarding immigrants in Iceland and their social situation. Many responses revealed how the closeness, direct eye contact and intimacy of the photographs encouraged the viewers to engage with the individuals within the context of a very personal space, the immigrants' own homes, and invited the visitor to seriously contemplate their cultural backgrounds, identities and current status within Icelandic society. To further elaborate on these findings, it would be useful to hold follow-up interviews with the same group of thirteen participants to provide richer data and a chance for more in-depth analysis regarding the long-term effect of the material.

Nevertheless, the analysis of visitor responses shortly after their museum visits indicates that the exhibition affected my participants in many different ways. The visual material clearly evoked critical thoughts and discussions along with a depth of emotions. In line with Witcomb's (2009) argument on how feelings of empathy can be evoked by focusing on personal belongings and home settings, the exhibition seemed to facilitate understanding and nurture warm feelings among some of my Icelandic informants. The study, however, mainly reveals how the visual material and the nuanced approach of the artist raised various emotional responses and critical contemplations regarding human mobility and immigrant issues in Iceland. The diverse, and somewhat ardent, responses from my informants highlight the importance of engaging with these topics through innovative artistic collaboration projects and thought-provoking visual material, such as The Long Apartment Block in Upper-Breiðholt at the National Museum of Iceland.

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### Inside Out: Redefining the Museum

In thinking about what a museum is now, we are not discussing the stewards of the museums who keep the buildings operating, money coming in, exhibitions developed, objects cared for and protected, programs running, and visitors welcomed.

We are not discussing the hastily made diversity statements that go unadhered when it comes to the actual hiring of diverse candidates and the often unsafe and unsupportive environments into which they are thrust.

Nor are we addressing the devaluation of the Front of House staff that we often laud as the “face of the museum” while ignoring their concerns or suggestions for improvement.

But, perhaps, we could broach the topic of compensation that stems from a system wherein unpaid interns enter the field being asked to do work that exceeds any pedagogical purpose, but rather serves as a convenient source of labor. These internships lead to entry-level positions that pay poverty-level wages in a field with an over-saturation of degree-holding candidates.

We could think about calls for salary transparency and unionization as steps in the right direction for all in the field.

We could begin to imagine institutions led by fairly-paid and amply-skilled museum workers of all abilities, orientations, and backgrounds who feel supported and encouraged by their senior staff and board.

Or an institution truly immersed in the surrounding community, encouraging neighbors to participate in their museum, while celebrating their stories as much as their lauded collections.

We could envision the museum of now ushering in the next generation of museum professionals with realistic expectations and appropriate compensation for their contributions.

Because it is they who will lead us into the museums of the future, the vision of which we can't yet fully grasp, because these future stewards of our profession aren't sure if the field is worth pursuing.

We should not seek to change the definition of museums without actually changing what the museum really looks like, how it operates, and whom it serves.

**Sierra Van Ryck deGroot**, Education Programs Manger at Poster House

# Exhibition Review

## The Mirror

By Elli Leventaki

From February to April 2019, the Schwarz Foundation along with accomplished academic and curator Katerina Gregos organised the exhibition “Anatomy of Political Melancholy” in the heart of Athens, Greece. The modern building of Athens Conservatoire was selected to feature artworks by twenty-four Greek and international artists and one artists’ group. The exhibition aimed to examine the current political decay in Europe, by highlighting challenging issues, such as social injustice, corruption, populism, migration and economic failure. From the beginning, the exhibition was received with ambiguous criticism, thus creating the temptation for a visit, to find out whether the artworks would be as provocative as the title.

The selected space was efficiently used, with the architectural shapes being effectively incorporated in the show and the light (or the absence of it) being treated symbolically. There were a few greatly staged scenes in relation to the artworks,

while others proved to be rather problematic context-wise. In some occasions, artworks carried rather obvious or mainstream messages regarding the current political scene, like Tom Molloy’s “Candidate” (2012).

The artist exhibited 47 actual election posters of Marine Le Pen from the streets of Rouen (France), which were defaced by the people of the city. Probably the most provocative one amongst them (which was also highly reproduced by the media) showcased the politician with a painted black brushstroke over her lip, clearly referring to Hitler’s characteristic mustache.

Such comments, despite not being extremely complex or profound, are somewhat expected due to their intelligibility and straightforwardness. However, cultural reproduction of politics can be more complicated. As art historian and theorist M. B. Rasmussen has argued, by aestheticizing even the most



Figure 1: “It exhausts my elbows” (2018- ) by Marianna Christofides

radical political ideas, art is being “completely emptied of critical content” (Rasmussen 2012: 233). Unfortunately, a few artists missed the mark, while pursuing aesthetic integrity. For example, “It exhausts my elbows” (2018- ) by Marianna Christofides (Figure 1), showcased photographs of abandoned or ruined urban buildings, presented as film strips on LED panels along with a magnifying glass for the visitor to use in order to zoom in. Her purpose was to raise questions regarding temporality, migration and the impersonal character of cityscapes. While the absence of humans was intentional in her pictures, the overall presentation could not properly support the social comment she was trying to make. Her photos were intriguing as landscape depictions, but their emptiness, along with the fact that many of them were black and white, created a feeling of distance. The inclusion of a magnifying glass, despite being proposed as an alternative interactive tool, completed this archival approach, which prevented the viewers from relating to the content, or place it in the contemporary context, thus depriving the work of its originally-intended critique.

Similar inconsistencies could be found in Eirene Efstathiou’s work (Figure 2), “Artifacts (for the Revolution)” (2013), a series of photo collage ink jet prints. By putting together old and new objects linked to various revolutionary practices and

acts, she created images with a humorous or nostalgic view of what could otherwise be considered dangerous or radical. In this context, the intended re-appropriation ended up stripping these items of their previous dynamics, transforming them into plain postcards. The artist may have aimed to make a point on political radicalization and the need for revolutionary ideas, but by prioritizing aesthetics, she produced a series of imaginative vintage memorabilia.

The challenge when approaching sociopolitical events through an artistic prism is to not aestheticize them to the point where they will lose their actual meaning or message. A counterexample would be “The Tourists: a campaign” (2015-2017), by Depression Era, who grasped this issue and boldly crossed the fine line between art and politics. The art group printed a series of large posters, mimicking those used in touristic campaigns, while also adding images or phrases that commented on migration, decadence and consumption. Upon openly characterizing the average tourist as “impotent to frame History in anything more than a postcard, slogan or tweet” (Babasikas 2019: 29), they consequently proved their point by offering free copies of these posters, probably wondering who would hang them over their couch.



Figure 2: “Artifacts (for the Revolution)” (2013) by Eirene Efstathiou



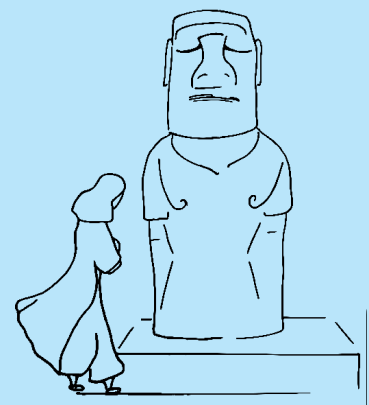
In this case, a borderline aestheticization of over-tourism and the migration crisis did have critical overtones, by reminding the viewer of the hazards of perceiving an image exclusively based on its aesthetic value while missing the point.

The great philosopher and critic W. Benjamin, in his theory regarding the work of art, has mentioned the dangers of aestheticization of politics and alienation, which could result in the viewer enjoying the representation of reality with no intention of (re) action. He had observed years ago that mankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Benjamin 1969: 20). That being said, this exhibition seems more alarming sociologically than culturally, as people were invited to face and enjoy their own decay. Even though the curator managed to approach holistically the political scenery in Europe, by selecting artists whose works covered the whole spectrum of current controversy, the result was indeed melancholic.

For the most part, artists chose to remain passive observers, by mainly reproducing existing questions and narratives in their works rather than attempting to propose alternatives, thus justifying the selected title of the show. There is a chance, however, that this was the purpose of the exhibition all along: to point out that artists, as social human beings, are affected by their surrounding circumstances and so is their art. Sadly, what people came across, whether it pleased them or not, was in fact a mirror.

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