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# Distributed Community. Participatory Actions and Organizational Culture of a Museum Institution

**Abstract**

The article discusses the consequences of participatory actions in a museum exemplified by the *Find Art* exhibition presented at the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz in 2017. It focuses on the transformative impact of participatory projects on museum culture and organizational structure. Museums have shifted from collection-driven entities to audience-oriented institutions, blurring lines between entertainment, education, and cultural heritage. The author highlights the changing paradigm of museums from old to new museology, critiquing power structures within museums. Based on the analysis of the *Find Art* exhibition the author argues that participatory projects reconfigure a museum institution, creating a Protean community of multi-functional collaborations that challenge conventional museum roles. He suggests a post-critical approach, defining a "distributed museum," where networks of dependencies redefine the museum's role beyond traditional boundaries. The author acknowledges the diverse contributions within the distributed museum, encompassing both formal and informal entities and addresses potential implications of exploitation within this dynamic community.

**Keywords:** museum, museum education, new museology, participation, community project

## Rozproszona wspólnota. Działania partycypacyjne i kultura organizacyjna instytucji muzealnej

### Abstrakt

Tekst stanowi omówienie konsekwencji działań partycypacyjnych w muzeum na przykładzie wystawy Find Art w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi z 2017 roku. Autor skupia się na transformującym wpływie projektów partycypacyjnych na strukturę organizacyjną muzeum. Przemiana, jaką przeszły muzea – od instytucji opartych na kolekcjonowaniu do placówek skoncentrowanych na publiczności – zatarła granice między rozrywką, edukacją i dziedzictwem kulturowym. Autor zwraca uwagę na zmianę paradygmatu muzeum – ze starej muzeologii na nową muzeologię, będącą krytyką struktur władzy. Na podstawie analizy wystawy *Find Art* autor dowodzi, że projekty partycypacyjne rekonfigurują instytucję muzeum, tworząc proteuszową wspólnotę multifunkcjonalnej współpracy, która kwestionuje tradycyjne role w muzeum. Proponuje podejście postkrytyczne, definiując „rozproszone muzeum", w którym sieci wzajemnych zależności redefiniują rolę muzeum poza tradycyjnymi jej granicami. Uznaje różnorodny udział w rozproszonym muzeum, obejmujący podmioty zarówno sformalizowane, jak i niesformalizowane; odnosi się także do potencjalnych konsekwencji wyzysku w tej dynamicznej społeczności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** muzeum, edukacja muzealna, nowa muzeologia, partycypacja, projekt społecznościowy.

## Introduction: Participatory Exhibitions in Polish Museums

For the past 15 years, participatory exhibition projects have been increasingly part of the mainstream of exhibitions in Polish museums. In 2009, the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz gave the green light to organize the *ms³ Re:akcja* [*ms³ Re:action*] project, curated by the author of these words. In 2013, the exhibition *Co ma koronka do wiatraka? Niderlandy* [*What Does Lace Have to Do with a Windmill? The Netherlands*] was prepared by the National Museum in Poznan. In 2016, the project *W muzeum wszystko wolno* [*Everything is Allowed in the Museum*] was presented by the National Museum in Warsaw. All three were pioneering initiatives of this kind in Polish museums.

This text is dedicated to yet another participatory project: the exhibition *Find Art*, realized in 2017 at the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz as part of a larger European project, *Translocal: Museum as a Toolbox*. In analyzing it, firstly, I will elucidate how the community of its implementers was constituted – a process to which I was a witness *in statu nascendi*. Secondly, I will indicate how the formation of a participatory community reconfigures the museum institution; these changes occur at the level of both the facts and the language used to describe them. I will also demonstrate that this is not an isolated case – within the European discourse on museums, this phenomenon has already been addressed.

## Redefining Museums: A Shift Towards Visitor-Centricity

There is widespread consensus that over the past four decades, the institution of the museum has undergone a radical change, unlike perhaps any other cultural institution. This transformation can be described as a non-simultaneous (what is important) reorientation of both the organizational culture of the institution, and the paradigm of discursive reflection about it.

Firstly, museums have evolved from institutions based on collections to organizations focused on visitors. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill already observed this paradigmatic transformation from museums focused on objects to museums oriented toward the public (Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 134). Museums have dramatically changed their justification for existence. They are no longer determined by their collections and the research, publications, or exhibitions dedicated to them. Today, the museum's existence is justified by the audience it profiles, whose well-being is diagnosed, whose purchasing power is subject to analysis. This has led to a reconfiguration of the institutional museum's operational formula. It is increasingly challenging to differentiate museum proposals from entertainment activities, tourist ventures, the cultural heritage industry, the functioning of shopping centers, the art market, and even artistic practices. Defining the museum solely based on the policy of representation – of individuals, communities, cultures, places, events, etc. – seems to be somewhat anachronistic, or at the very least, it requires more nuance. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, editors of the anthology *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum,* go as far as even to suggest that today, a more useful question than 'What is a museum?' is rather: 'When is a museum?' (Preziosi, Farago 2004: 2–3).

Even museum professionals, such as those united in ICOM, in 2022 adjusted the definition of the museum to reflect the ongoing changes. The adopted characterization emphasizes that the museum's activity, based on principles of ethics, professional integrity, and social participation, offers diverse experiences serving "education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing" (ICOM: 2022). This multi-offering seems to be paradigmatic. The museum environment, although nearly by definition conservative, increasingly sees this transformation less as a "threat" to blur the essential difference between the museum institution and, for example, a community center, which was recently referred to in Poland as the phenomenon of a 'community-centrification' of a museum (*Muzeum w przestrzeni edukacji otwartej* 2012: 9).

Secondly, another transformation is occurring at the same time. Traditional reflection on the museum institution, focused on practical issues of researching, collecting, conserving, interpreting, and presenting museum artifacts, began to be labeled as "old museology" and gave way to a much more theoretical discourse: the new museology, essentially a form of institutional critique. In general, in new museology the museum is presented in Foucauldian language as a technology of panoptic control and disciplinary vision, as a state institution of civilizing rituals and civic reforms, and as a structure serving the exercise of social differences. In critical theory

integrated into academic museological research, the museum started to embody contested power in the public sphere (Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh 2013: 223).

This situation deepens the distance between museum theorists and museum practitioners. The former largely conduct a meta-discourse not so much for the transformation of the museum institution but due to research and scholarly careers, while the latter are mostly skeptical of theoretical conclusions, seeing the museum fundamentally as a separate professional sphere governed often by experience and "tacit knowledge." Few attempts have been made to implement theories into practice. A handful of those who believe in the educational mission of both an university institution and a museum institution still produce knowledge without certainty of its status and recipients. I identify with this last role myself, similarly to Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa, and Victoria Walsh, to whom I owe this enumeration (Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh 2013: 222) – for over fourteen years, I have been both a researcher (at the University of Lodz) and a museum educator (at the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz). The rift between the abstract discourse of new museology theory and the contingency of daily museum practice can be observed in the functioning of every museum institution. It is strongly evident in the disregard that theorizing curators show towards the actions of educator teams (Karczewski 2012).

This rift between practicing the museum and theorizing about the museum has another, much higher, cost. It is overlooked – I write this from the perspective of Latourian actor-network theory (Latour 2005) – that the proliferation of institutional activity formulas in recent decades has redefined and multiplied the meanings of individual elements within the entire museum ecosystem. The audience with which educator teams engage, animated according to the principles of constructivist engagement pedagogy, is neither the audience presumed by curator theories nor the audience whose purchasing power the museum shop calculates, nor the audience for whose strategic support directors lobby (Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh 2013: 222). The transformation of roles is not limited to just the updating of institutional criticism demands, where the artist merely becomes a collaborator and producer of a "situation," the artwork becomes a "project" with an unspecified duration, and the passive spectator is ennobled as an active participant (Bishop 2012: 3). The reality is much more protean. I argue that it is most apparent in projects traditionally perceived as participatory. I want to present in detail one of these projects I had the opportunity to co-create. Its title is *Translocal: Museum as Toolbox*.

## Innovative Museology:
## Empowering Youth through Museum Engagement

The idea for the *Translocal: Museum as Toolbox* project emerged in 2015 when five contemporary art museums, located in five somewhat peripheral European cities, decided to explore new forms of communication with the public: through non-standard exhibition forms, innovative educational formats, and unusual forums for exchanging

experiences. These are the titular new tools for museums, co-created by young curators, educators, and artists gathered around Kunsthaus Graz, KUMU Tallinn, MSU Zagreb, Museion Bozen/Bolzano, and the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz.

The *Museum as Toolbox* project focused on a particularly problematic audience for museums – the youth and young adults aged 15–25. The first challenge was their absence. People in this age group tend to avoid routine school visits to museums and typically do not yet engage with museum offerings, even with their own children. They become a "non-public" for museums.

The second challenge was the different communication strategies of this "non-public," which blend formal and informal, linguistic and non-verbal, face-to-face contact and communication mediated through the network. This diversity was reflected in the interactive and interdisciplinary nature of the project presented in each of the five museums. The geographic, linguistic, and historical diversity of experiences of young people from Graz, Tallinn, Zagreb, Bozen/Bolzano, and Lodz, who were invited to collaborate by the respective museums, made the "tools" developed in the project genuinely diverse.

The collaboration occurred on three levels: educational, curatorial, and communicative. The project began with a research phase, comprising online surveys, residencies of curators, artists, and educators, months-long workshops with young people, and finally, a conference confronting the partners' experiences. One of the effects of the *Museum as Toolbox* project was a traveling exhibition, elements of which appeared in 2017 in each of the five museum institutions. In each location, it referred to the history of a specific collection, building, and local context.

The exhibition *Find Art* was the Polish installment prepared by 18 members of an informal youth club which emerged during the project at the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz. The exhibition brought together works from the museum collection related to the theme of communication. Its three-part structure surfaced in May 2016 during a residency by Aldo Giannotti, an Italian artist working in Vienna, who proposed actions for the youth regarding the presence of art in public space – how to search for it and how to find it. Two other questions posed by young curators were: 'When will it be possible to touch exhibits in a museum?' and 'When will contemporary art become old?'

The *Find Art* exhibition was on display from May 27 to August 27, 2017, at ms[1] – Muzeum Sztuki Lodz. It was the result of the substantive work of the curatorial team comprising Sabina Bałulis, Maria Dorenda, Dominika Grzelak, Julia Kaczmarek, Michał Kropiwnicki, Julia Lewańska, Weronika Ławniczak, Zuzanna Masierek, Marta Miniszewska, Natalia Mularska, Jakub Olszak, Magdalena Płaczek, Helena Sej, Krystyna Split, Jakub Stefański, Matylda Suska, Jagoda Sydor, Karolina Wyrwas, working under the supervision of curator-tutors: Agnieszka Wojciechowska-Sej and Łukasz Zaremba.

The young people developed the exhibition script, progressing from warehouse queries to laying out exhibition plans. They also engaged in direct negotiations with an artist, Karol Radziszewski, who was persuaded by the young curators to lend one of his works for the exhibition, which was not part of the museum's collection. But this traditionally perceived role of the curator did not exhaust their real engagement. Those

involved in the project as exhibition implementers participated materially in its preparation. Alongside the construction team, they painted walls, laid tiles and wallpapers. They participated in the installation of all works. They wrote exhibition texts by hand on walls, some with typographical errors, which they also independently corrected.

All the words on the exhibition walls were also authored by the youth. They were created verbatim during creative writing workshops for young curators. The exhibition texts, formulating questions essential to curators, also deviate from the discourse on contemporary art. They did not resemble the monologic voice of the hypostasized museum subject; rather, it was more akin to poetic prose which communicated personal experiences, especially in fragments of confessions, personal yet anonymous:

> I look for some time, looking for company, for a dress suitable for a school ball, and for the meaning of life. I find some of these things next to the Manu letters, on Piotrkowska Street, next to the Saspol, and on my own yard.
> I find a place to spend time with friends. A cafeteria, a joint with some food, pancakes, a kebab. I find the right place to go roller-skating or biking, to play volleyball.
> I look in places that are not crowded, not noisy, not too cold and stinky. Where there's no meaning of life neither. It's a pity but whatever.
> Can you look for art there? Can you find art there?
>
> I shake hands with people that I meet for the first time. I touch cats and dogs, clothes, cutlery, buttons, dough and soft blankets. I feel with my hands, my whole body. It gives me pleasure and knowledge.
> I'm touched by a sound of a crying baby and by critical words. I feel touched by family issues, memes, lack of respect, and grammar mistakes.
> You're not allowed to touch fire, electric wires, the edge of a blade, certain substances till you're 18, and windows that were just cleaned.
> You're not allowed to touch art in the museum. But you can be touched by art.
>
> I'm old so my face is wrinkled and my hair is pinkish. But I'm optimistic and looking forward to another day despite my weak health.
> I have a dozen of grandchildren, a herd of dogs, and endless bric-à-brac. I do my window cleaning and put on new curtains all the time. Or I control the arrangement of the furniture coming out of walls remotely just with my voice. I don't remember anything and I spend whole days in fancy bed sheets. I have a chain that holds my glasses. Or maybe I can afford corrective eye surgeryI'm not the only thing that's getting old. Floppy discs and CD records became old already. A typewriter, a landline phone, teletext, VHS, wallpapers, songs by Maryla Rodowicz, and celebrating your name day – all of them are old and out of fashion.
> So what will be the old days of contemporary art?[1]

Young curators, acting as educators, led tours through the exhibition once a week. Moreover, the *Museum as Toolbox* project led to the establishment of the youth club ms[17] at the Muzeum Sztuki Lodz. The number in the name indicated the

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[1]   As in a leaflet of *Find Art* show; translation into English by Łukasz Zaremba.

average age of the young curators at the time when they were creating the exhibition. The vast majority attended weekly meetings at the museum for two years, until their high school graduation.

## Beyond Representation:
## Rethinking Museums as Distributed Communities

The community of individuals creating the *Find Art* exhibition is a Protean community: a network of curators and a construction team, as well as a commune of poets and an educational team. It is not merely about rhetorically demystifying the essential nature of the museum and demonstrating the social construction of knowledge and power. In my view – a perspective in harmony with the conclusions presented by Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh, researcher-practitioners working at the Tate Gallery in London – participatory projects have the power not only to thematize community, pointing out its presence or absence, or revealing micro-communities, etc. I believe that participatory projects not only expose petrified structures but actively reconstruct them.

If young people create an exhibition in a museum over a single museum season, performing all professional roles at once, are they staying outside the museum organization, or are they entering it? Are they still civilians or already museum professionals? Who are they? Whom do they actually represent?

This question exposes primarily the crisis of the modern model of linear thinking about progress and representation. Young people create a shimmering community where they simultaneously find themselves in immediate roles often drawn out by the object: painting on canvas for an artwork, or painting on the museum wall, or painting on a printed leaflet. Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh propose converting this doubt into the calling of post-critical museology. It would break away from theoretical museum criticism and constitute a return to empirical and pragmatic research in the spirit of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and self-reflection. They propose to define its object of interest with the term "distributed museum" (Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh 2013: 226–227).

The concept of the museum in the traditional sense evokes the relationship between a Foucauldian-conceived power/knowledge cultural institution and the assumed cultural deficit of the individual hosted within it. However, the term "distributed museum" – in the spirit of ANT (Actor-Network Theory) – encompasses a new formula to produce knowledge and/or aesthetic experience/reflection. In this new model, a person visiting a museum is no longer a representative of society, an outsider – similarly, a museum is no longer defined by organizational culture, architecture, as a collection, etc. On the contrary: individuals, ideas, objects, social relationships, cognitive values, the aesthetic sphere co-create Proteus-like, variable, interdependent, multidimensional networks of functional collaborations (all in the plural). These are new ecologies, rejecting as useless the fetishized labels of profession, class, communities, or petrified economies of material, cognitive,

and aesthetic values. In these new post-representational networks, dependencies constantly form new valuations of new values, where what is still museum-related intertwines with what is already part of everyday practice. This is the only way the museum disperses – into other networks, collectives, communities. In this way, other networks, groups, stakeholders are also invited to operate within the museum's network (Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh 2013: 233–245).

In the network/community/ecology of the *Find Art* project, none of the young participants were any longer fetishized as a representatives of the non-public, the voice of the seventeen-year-olds, as members of the youth club, etc. Nor were they at any moment appointed as curators, exhibition installers, or educators. At the same time, they were engaging in other activities, for instance making not always wise jokes, ostentatiously kissing, scrolling through screens on mobile phones, and so on. Similarly, each member of the educational team collaborating on this project was also a driver, porter, journalist, photo-reporter, photo editor, editor, DTP operator, cook, set designer, psychologist, organizer of children's and youth leisure time... It is impossible to think of all these elements as an affirmation of personal talents, wealth of resources, or the actualization of possibilities. Unfortunately, it is worth to critically acknowledge that the "distributed museum" may also be an elegant, humanistic way of describing the daily financial and organizational conditions of the inherently precarious work in cultural institutions, not only in a specific museum. It may simply be a humanitarian euphemism for the ecology of exploitation, which has been recently (autumn 2023) publicly discussed a bit louder in Poland due to the debate around Aleksandra Boćkowska's book *To wszystko nie robi się samo. Rozmowy na zapleczu kultury* [*It Doesn't All Happen by Itself: Conversations Behind the Scenes of Culture*] (Boćkowska 2023). The distributed museum is also a community of micro-activities, from content-making to cleaning...

Participatory communal actions reintegrate the dispersed museum community, which also expands to orbit around formally employed individuals and members of formal and informal families, their talents, their capital of free time, their care, cars, provisions, and equipment. To this dispersed community – Barbara Kaczorowska, Katarzyna Gołębowska, Katarzyna Mądrzycka-Adamczyk, Maja Pawlikowska, Jakub Rychter, Maria Wasińska-Stelmaszczyk, Marta Wlazeł, Małgorzata Wiktorko, Agnieszka Wojciechowska-Sej, our husbands, partners, and children – I would like to dedicate this text.

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Dr Leszek Karczewski is an assistant professor at the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the University of Lodz. From 2008 to 2022, he was the head of the Education Department at the Museum of Art in Lodz. He is a literary theorist, theater scholar, museum professional, and cultural educator. He has created e.g., the "Kulturanek" TV series which was awarded the Sybilla prize in 2012. Between 2017 and 2019, he served in the Program Council of the National Institute for Museums. He has been honored with the honorary badge for Merit to Polish Culture.

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