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# Introduction

## Visiting the Visitor ...

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Within museums there is a definite shift toward recognition of the importance of the visitor. But this mindset is not always followed by actions. Museums try all kinds of ways to empower the visitor, to offer her resources for meaning making and action, to inspire him to participate. Nevertheless, the empowered visitor achieves the experience she wants when going to a museum. She seeks meaning, her meaning, discovered her own way. What might that experience be and how can it be achieved? Can we gain access to the experience of the visitors? Can we understand and describe their experiences? What does it mean to say that every visitor has a unique, unclassifiable identity? Some museums make extensive use of technological reproductions as the main medium of their exhibitions, offering means of participation. But does technology really promote accessibility to real objects, or will the effect rather be the reverse—even further alienation from the object? These are only a few of the questions that the essays in this book seek to answer.

In 2010 the International Committee for Museology, ICOFOM, a committee of the International Council of Museums, ICOM, decided to concentrate for the next three years on the subject of museum visitors. To this end ICOFOM solicited papers and held three conferences on aspects of the nature and problems of museum visitors. The first year, 2011, meeting in Taiwan, the topic was the Dialogic museum and the visitor experience; the next year, meeting in Tunis, the topic discussed was Empowering the visitor: process, progress and protest; and the third year, 2013, at the triennial ICOM meeting in Rio de Janeiro, the topic presented was the Special visitor: each and every one of us. Taken together, the papers give a rich and varied view of the evolving and potential relationship between the museum and the visitor.

The first topic, the dialogic museum, proved to be a challenging one. Part of the reason was that the term dialogic was ambiguous. On the one hand, the term, invented by the Russian semiologist Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics* (1973), applied to an active network of

meaning in the development of the self in relation to others. On the other hand, ethno-museologists, such as John Juo Wei Chen, in a 1992 article "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment" gave the term a broader interpretation, one geared to exhibitions and general museum practice, where participatory public activities were emphasized. Some authors, unfortunately, treated the theme as visitor studies, which it certainly was not. The resulting papers provoked a rich discussion.

The second year, the conversation swirled around the empowered visitor. While the first seminar explored the theory behind the shift towards the visitor and away from the collection, the second seminar turned more specifically to the individual herself, considering what empowerment meant and what such a change in emphasis would mean for the visitor and for the museum. One fear has been that an increase in visitor empowerment would axiomatically mean a decrease in the power and control by the museum. Is this fear justified? Furthermore if a person is empowered, in what way might that happen? Does this relate to services or is this expanded to encompass sensory experiences, learning and self-growth? Here is probed the complex question of the construction of meaning.

The third seminar concentrated on the difficult question of the nature of individual and group meaning making. Hitherto museums have attempted to group visitors according to interests, gender, education, and age. In this way, all children were given the same tour, even if some children were not interested in that specific material or some were very knowledgeable about it and others were not. Increasingly education theory is teaching us that individuals are very different, that it is counterproductive to assume that all the members of a group might think and feel the same when engaged with a museum. Authors considered approaches that might ensure that each visitor is recognized as an individual and provided with sufficient material to develop and contribute at his own level.

Part of the challenge and excitement of working with museum professionals and academics from all around the world is a very real recognition that regional and linguistic differences abound. Museums and museum theories have developed at differing paces and in various ways in distinct parts of the world. South America, for example, has developed its own, interesting systems, quite divergent from those in much of Europe. At the same time, language is potentially fraught, not only because ICOM deals in three languages, English, French and Spanish and that many of our contributors write in none of these languages, for their native tongue is not one of the three, but also because the same word in one language does not necessarily mean the same thing in another. We have often tripped over this truism, this assumption that we are communicating clearly when we are not. The fifteen papers in this volume do not propose to solve but rather to expose interesting regional, contextual and

linguistic differences for we firmly hold the belief that such differences are enriching and very valid.

By way of introduction to our themes, Jennifer Harris examines the role of affect in exhibition visits by looking at three museum spaces that operate entirely on the affective level. Along with deepening exploration of visitors' behavior, their expectations and needs, as well as accessibility, museums have found themselves needing to express contexts and events for which we seem not to have an adequate verbal language. Hence, museums have begun to turn to the physical body of the visitor in order to find a way to express the inexpressible and to represent the unrepresentable. Affect, physical bodily sensations that precede emotional understanding is being foregrounded in museum exhibitions. Affect centres the visitor in the exhibition resulting in the greatest power in the museum that the visitor has ever had.

But, asks Daniel Schmitt in his essay, can we – and how can we – gain access to what museum visitors experience? In particular, can we grasp the physical and cognitive process through which knowledge is constructed in museums? Schmitt focuses on visitor experiences from an *enactive* perspective, that which makes sense from the point of view of the visitors during their visit. The visitor's actions and cognitive paths, his "course of experience" is analyzed by subjective re-situ interviews that allow us to understand the basic units of the visitor's engagement.

Contemporary museum pedagogy and learning theories have turned to the individual visitor to gain an understanding of how exhibitions work. In this we owe a great deal to John Falk, who in his research, and in his essay in this volume, has explored the nature of the visitor's experience and its dynamic, highly individualized character. The ways in which individuals talk about why they went to the museum as well as the ways they talk about what they remember from their experience invariably seem to have a lot to do with what they were seeking to personally accomplish through their visit. This then leads Falk to investigate the importance of personal identity that steer the choices a visitor makes before, during and after a museum visit. A key understanding of this identity is that each of us has not one single identity but maintains numerous identities which are expressed collectively or individually at different times, depending upon need and circumstance. There is always an "identity motivation" for a museum visit and this should be taken into account when planning exhibitions. Building and supporting personal identity, Falk discovered, was the primary driving motivation behind virtually all people's museum visits.

Elisabeth Weiser, in her essay, focuses on the rhetorical sense of identity as action, the sense that museums and their visitors are a discourse community in which each individual—be they visitor or staff—is actively engaged in building a common story/identity that does not exist in reality but is instead an *imagined*

community. Weiser's paper deals with how individuals in museums invoke *their own* group identities with which to identify, and this invocation/identification process is explored through the lens of what rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke called a *personalizing of essence*: the individual characteristics that make up one's personal identity narrative are translated into an abstract reflection, then translated back into a narrative larger than oneself—a persuasive narrative of self in society.

Ann Davis looks in her essay at some of the social pressures that are encouraging museums to pay more attention to their visitors' needs and wants and some of the problems behind so doing. Starting with motivations for visiting identified by John Falk, Davis considers how these motivations might effect visitor empowerment and how market forces might break in and change things. Do exhibitions of today really help and empower the non-specialist visitor to gain knowledge, she asks. The truth is that they often don't, because not much has changed in terms of museum display. Museum staff has been slow to recognize and react to this reality and Davis considers reasons for resistance, also discussed in Kerstin Smeds' essay.

Smeds is concerned about the over use of technology in museum exhibitions and also recognizes the need for deep change in order to enhance real accessibility to the objects themselves. The much talked-about participation, dialogue and access to the collections is all a chimera as long as objects are more and more protected by conservation rules, security and other preservation measures which push the visitor ever further away from the object itself. Through the lens of phenomenological theory Smeds explores our intimate relationship to materiality and objects which we use as "equipments to go on with our lives" (Heidegger). In most museums this intimate relationship with objects is brutally cut off, which prevents many visitors from garnering and maintaining enough interest in museum exhibitions in general.

Bruno Brulon Soares takes the theoretical discussion in another direction, away from objects and individuals and explores the museum performance as analogous to that of theater. He proposes a theory of performance for museums. With the theatrical analogy he wants to explain the relation between museum and its audience.

Theater and museum both represent the real. But a museum is much more: through performance, museums add something else to reality. Museums perform the past, and also our relationships—as actors in the present—with it. Performance is a plea for permanent creation of a new attitude towards the "old" familiar aspects of the world. Museums, thus, not only *perform for* their audience, but *perform the* audiences, generating reflexive dialogues from which identities arise.

The next three essays all explore the visitor business in museums through the lens of some specific theory; Aida Rechina through the theory of social

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representation, Anna Leshchenko through perceptual psycholinguistic theory and Vitaly Ananiev through the theory of mirror neurons.

Social representations, Rechená notes, are cognitive phenomena and systems of interpretation which are present at all moments of interaction between individuals, and between individuals and reality. Social representations are created collectively, they are social thoughts elaborated by members of a group, which allows them to understand the world and communicate between themselves. Museums and museological exhibitions as a means of communication are also social phenomena: places where social representations interact, alter and emerge. When considering the visitor as an “actor”, the museum becomes a place of negotiation, a place of confrontation between the observer (= museum visitor), the observed (= the exhibition) and the producer (= curators and other museum professionals). Hence the museum is a place of contact between social representations: the museologist, the visitor, and the ones contained in the displayed museological objects. Thus the museum appears as a conducive terrain for change and formation of new social representations.

From social interaction we leap into the deep individuality of a person. With the help of psycholinguistics and a theory of perception, Anna Leshchenko wants to find an inside-out way to see the visitor, instead of the more usual approach of paying attention to outer effects (behavior, leisure habits, demographics etc). By taking a look at the visitor’s perception skills from a psycholinguistic perspective, Leshchenko argues that museologists can create a new way of understanding why each visitor, who is encouraged to become a creative agent in the participatory paradigm, is more involved in museum communication and learns more than others who are not encouraged to be “agents”.

In his first short contribution on visitors, perception and cognition, Vitaly Ananiev guides the reader away from the field of arts into natural sciences, more precisely biology. He argues that the modern discovery of mirror neurons in the field of science, showed that the well-known statements of philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “there is no subject without object, and no object without subject,” actually has a foundation in biology. The much talked-about “dialogue” and the dialogic museum is, Ananiev claims, not an invention of Michail Bakhtin and the sociologist, but rather something that is explained through the existence of mirror neurons in our body and mind. Human nature is by its own nature “doomed to dialogue”.

In his second paper, Ananiev presents his investigation of early theoretical debate on museums and visitors in the Soviet Union in the 1920’s and 30’s. The Institute for the History of Arts was founded in Saint Petersburg in 1912. This included the sections of Pedagogy, the Study of the art of the peasants in Northern Russia as well as the Museum Section. Members of this Museum Section presented papers on the most current issues of museum work and discussed

them during their debates. They compiled bibliographies of literature in both Russian and foreign languages in the field of museology and the organization of museums; they prepared exhibitions; they produced a volume of articles; in the summer they directed practical workshops located in the museum-palaces around Leningrad. One paper, “Issues regarding the perception of the museum visitor” in the 20’s, caused a lively debate; it touched directly on museum activities and raised questions concerning the principal substance of the museum’s objectives, adding new objectives to museums. It brought about reforms, one of which was that museums were transformed into entirely new social establishments in the Soviet Union, with focus on visitors’ needs.

Žarka Vujić and Helena Stublić have explored the attitudes towards museum visitors in Croatia from a diachronic perspective. They note that within Croatian museology, there was little earlier interest in museum visitors and their significance for museums as learning institutions. One reason for this is that museology in Croatia has its roots in information science, not in the liberal arts. Here museology was formed within the global theoretical framework of informatics and structuralism. Hence, visitors were introduced into the theoretical arena only in 1999, as interpreters in a schematic presentation of semiosis of museum objects in the act of collecting. In this respect theory did not follow practice, since museum practices acknowledged visitors long before that, even in the socialist period from 1945 to 1991, and today there is a “boom” in the study of visitors in Croatia.

From the more historical perspective we move on to the ever so important question of authenticity in museums. As her starting point, Cristina Vannini takes the renovation of a museum—Museo Civico di Sansepolcro (home town of Piero della Francesca who painted the *Resurrection*)—and ponders the consequences of renovations for the visitors’ expectations and respect for the authenticity of the place. The unexpected experience the staff had was that updating the communication system with explanatory, interactive and multimedia tools had to take second place to the acknowledgement that the visitors had no complaint at all about the lack of information. Instead, the bareness of the museum and the outdated display allowed visitors to enter into a more direct relationship with the artistic essence of Piero’s masterpieces. This essay underlines the importance of choosing the correct strategy in planning environments (exhibitions, museums) in which to enhance visitors’ experience of art.

Wan-Chen Chang’s essay investigates authenticity from a slightly different angle. Chang seeks to explore whether authenticity is important to the contemporary museum audience or not. She starts from theories of experiential learning, museum experience and experience economy, and, as a case study, explores the dinosaur exhibition in the renowned Life Science Hall at the National Museum of Natural Science in Taichung, Taiwan. Through interviews

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with an expert and visitors, this essay investigates how visitors to this science museum think about authenticity. Chang's investigation indicates that visitors have an authentic experience even if they know that the exhibit is "fake." The study argues that museums should distinguish between experience as an end and experience as a means, and should face up to the intrinsic nature of the museum audience's visiting experience.

Recognizing a growing interest in visitors' needs and empowerment, and museums having to cope with that, there has been much talk about a professional fear of "disneyfication" and diminishing power of the museums as research institutions. Colette Dufresne-Tassé and her team have studied seven cases of power games between museum and its visitors. In the context of the latter's visit, they discovered that diminishing the museum power does not entail a gain of power for the visitor, and that the increase of museum power could even mean an increase in the visitor's power. If the museum would explore new avenues, such as the search for more effective exhibitions or the enhancement of visitors' abilities to deal with them, it could gain power and simultaneously allow the visitor to gain power too.

The study of the museum visitor has undergone radical transformation. Not a single paper in this volume would comfortably fit the category of visitor studies, that examination of the demographics of visitors, including gender, age and education. Rather each author represented here has asked different questions and responded with new answers. Some of these questions involve the visitor's identity, what she brings to her museum experience in terms of past history and present expectations. Other questions probe the very nature of museum going, demanding that we reexamine the accepted fundamentals of the traditional exhibition to reposition the visitor, not the object, as the centre of the experience. This involves a new search for meaning, a new effort to understand why museums and collections, despite considerable challenges, are still considered major cultural institutions, organizations desired by countries developed and developing, and by cities large and small. All in all these essays do not provide one uniform answer to the many queries posed. Rather they seek to ask new questions, provoke new research and encourage new conclusions.

15 March, 2016

*Ann Davis and Kerstin Smeds*