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# **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC<sup>1</sup>**

## **– THE USE AND ACCESSIBILITY**

### **OF THE OBJECT FOR THE**

#### **BENEFIT OF THE PUBLIC**

The basis for this article is the oft-repeated, to some extent polemical, definition according to which a collection can only be considered a museum when it has an audience; otherwise, the collection is a store. At first glance, this view appears to somewhat ignore the manner in which more items are added to such ‘stores’ and how they are managed, and focuses more on the presentation of the store contents to outsiders. The perspective concentrates on collection displays and exhibitions, interpretation of artworks and the availability of information. Over the course of time, however, the notions of museum audiences and of their roles have changed, and, as appears later in this article, the audience’s focus eventually infiltrates even museum store contents and the fundamental questions related to collections.

#### **USABILITY OF COLLECTIONS**

When discussing the use and usability of museum collections, audiences are often referred to in this article as ‘museum users’. The selection of this term requires some explanation. There are differing connotations to various appellations, such as visitor, guest, viewer, learner and customer, and these appellations are an indication of the relationship between a museum and its audiences. ‘Viewer’ positions the visitor as a passive receiver, and ‘audience’ also emphasises the reception of offerings by the visitors (etymologically, the word ‘audience’ refers to hearing). A ‘guest’ has come to a museum to enjoy him or herself, a ‘customer’ is a person to whom services are being offered, and a ‘consumer’ is expected to use the products and services provided by a museum and to pay for them. In discussions in English, it is quite common to refer to museum visitors as ‘learners’ but in many other countries the term is seldom used by persons other than museum educators. Consid-

ering museum visitors learners gives them a more active and independent role than when associated with the foregoing appellations. It emphasises their independence in constructing meanings and in associating their observations to their life experiences, particularly when learning objectives are set by the learners themselves. Learning in a museum is supported by the concrete presence of items and artworks as well as by the experiential nature of learning.

Connotations to the word 'user' introduce an even wider scale of action; they depict museum visitors as active participants who independently determine the agenda of their museum visits and who also affect what happens in the museum. The user constructs his or her museum experience from the available ingredients and also contributes to the programme.

It is, perhaps, appropriate to point out that what is meant by *using* here does not refer to the kind of instrumental use of museums that seeks external benefits such as an increase in tourism or economic growth. Participating in culture is about personal agendas and spiritual enrichment – learning in the broad sense – and exchanging ideas, producing or affecting something, even about disturbing or protesting.

As regards collections and their use, there may be various interests and notions in society and among museum staff on the purpose and target group of collections. Public museums are historically bound to the state (nowadays also to smaller administrative units) and may be assigned, for example, to serve as a representative of the culture or identity of their area or nation. Museums are also closely associated with academia that has its requirements as regards the scientific basis for the collecting and the presentation of collections, of which these requirements vary for different types of museums. Moreover, contemporary financial and marketing perspectives put pressure on museums to maximise income and the number of visitors.

Different viewpoints imply varied notions on the possibilities of an audience to use collections. These notions place constraints on what the audience can be regarded as being allowed to do in a museum. From a viewpoint strongly emphasising scholarly expertise, the only people entitled to use museum collections are those with the appropriate professional education, while museum visitors are merely regarded as an audience. A more community-oriented viewpoint, on the contrary, will stress the audience's right of ownership with respect to the cultural heritage.

Assigning visitors with diverse roles also requires various kinds of activities and services from a museum. Learning is related to the notion of a museum as a learning environment, which requires that the various learning styles and learning goals of various individuals be taken into account. It is also nec-

essary to knowingly create facilities and situations that support learning. This will not necessarily happen if visitors are regarded as mere viewers. Furthermore, the notion of visitors as users is a part of regarding museums as a public space. It emphasises the role of museums as publicly funded institutions that serve all members of society. This viewpoint raises questions about how well the activities of museums cover various groups in society, and how well their voices are being heard in museums. The various forms of being a user of museums will be further discussed in the last part of the present article.

The accessibility of museum collections for the audience depends not only on the foregoing ideological stances, but also on highly practical aspects. Even when there is a mutual understanding that it is permissible for the audience to use the museum collections and that this is desirable, there are various practical obstacles ahead. The essential question is how people who do not work in a museum can learn about the museum collections and get their hands – both figuratively and literally – on the objects that are hidden in stores. Museum professionals have their methods for managing collections-related information, but can these be made available to the audience? Moreover, should they be? Furthermore, what opportunities are there for people to respond and work on their ideas based on the information that they have gained? These questions are discussed in the next chapter along with the notion of accessibility.

## **DEVELOPING ACCESS – FOR THE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION, STUDY, AND ENJOYMENT<sup>2</sup>**

The primary contact for the audience with museum collections are the items displayed in museums. Since only a fraction of the items possessed by a museum can be accommodated in a display at a time, one may ask what kind of idea of the museum collections that the museum visitors will get. Visitors do not necessarily even pay attention to the origins of the item that they are looking at, whether it is from the museum's own collections or on loan from elsewhere, but simply focus on what is being displayed. It requires special interest in the subject matter from the viewer to start considering the collection as a whole. What contributes to the viewer becoming interested in and familiar with the topic is the easy accessibility of information.

### **Digitalisation**

Digitalisation, which indeed has had an enormous impact on museum work as a whole, also opens unparalleled opportunities for the audience to retrieve information. The possibility to browse the contents of collections on-

line provides a better and more up-to-date idea of the extent and the entirety of collections than any printed catalogue.

Digitalisation of collections has been and is one of the great challenges for museums in the twenty-first century. It requires significant financial investment in both equipment and staff. These expenses are an addition to the costs of conventional museum work. Governments have subsidised the digitalisation of cultural heritage in many countries through specific programmes and other means of support. Besides for the resources, there are challenges in developing and selecting the appropriate and sustainable technology: it is not enough to develop databases, operating systems, interfaces and image formats once and for all. They must be continuously updated in order for them to remain usable as technology evolves.

From the viewpoint of the audience, the most important aspects after resolving the issues of finance and technology are the usability of information and i.e. copyright questions that restrict this usability. Museums use sophisticated systems to manage their collections and to structure information. These systems must include details of the documentation, origin, location, condition and value of items and artworks, together with descriptions for internal use. This information will not all necessarily directly serve users who do not work in the museum, and some of it cannot even be made available to the public. As many systems for public use are nevertheless based on such collection management systems, filtering information through various protocols for use on the museum website, the challenge is to restructure professional classification and management methods to be suitable for public use.

Indexing, i.e. content description<sup>3</sup> is very important from the viewpoint of the audience. Museum professionals who are familiar with their collections can find a certain artwork using an artist name or inventory number, for example, but for outsiders a search using just the name of the artist, or an object is too narrow. User-friendly collection searches are essentially intuitive: without knowing a single name or genre, a user is able to find information on art by searching for various themes, subjects and keywords.

The Tate Gallery (UK) has been developing digital access to its collection through its wide-ranging *Insight* project. The outcome of this project: the Tate Collection website provides a way to approach the museum collection via certain themes and various sub-themes. The website also offers partly game-like packages of varying structure. The collections web service of the Finnish National Gallery offers its users a tool that not only searches works by artist, period or category, but is primarily also an engine for multidimensional searches by keyword and by keyword combinations.

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Online services enable users to obtain information on museum collections regardless of geographical boundaries. The museums, however, follow their own guidelines in publishing their collections online: there are differences with respect to the information that is made available as well as in browsing options, search criteria and the manner in which search results are presented.<sup>4</sup> The scope and standard of the collections that a museum publishes also depend on its resources. Copyright issues are another factor that limits the ability to present and distribute images. This means that published online collections are not directly compatible.

The dream of merging the digitalised European cultural heritage into a single service has persisted for years, however. Broad agreement on common principles and practices will only be achieved if decisions are taken at a sufficiently high level. The goal for *Europeana 1.0*, a co-operative project of universities, research institutions and content producers led by the European Union, is to create a Europe-wide digital portal linking together libraries, archives, scientific and cultural institutions. The portal already has hundreds of partners and content producers and there are millions, and there will soon be tens of millions, of records in the database.

The basic idea for *Europeana* is to provide users with a virtual library offering cultural heritage for browsing and viewing. In a sense, this idea dates back to one presented by John Cotton Dana (1856–1929), an early developer of the concept of a museum, according to which museums are like libraries: reserves available to anyone to use.<sup>5</sup> New technology makes this kind of dream

possible, as all art and information can be encoded into bits. The same system can process text, images and audio material, and can thus combine information from various sources in the same archive of archives.

Europeana is based on open source applications and the opportunities offered by the Semantic Web to combine information from various sources and databases. By using a semantic annotation system, new and better ways are sought for a better understanding of the multilingual information derived from heterogeneous sources and for organising, finding and sharing it. From the viewpoint of users, the key feature is *My Europeana*, which enables users to collect and organise the information that is relevant to them. This kind of variety of usage opportunities, such as customising services to meet personal needs, is vital for the usability of any digital application. Challenges still to be addressed include language and copyright issues.<sup>6</sup>

### Interpretation

The presenting of collections – whether physically in museum halls or virtually online – also involves the interpretation of collections. The person who makes the interpretations has the power to choose, and a great responsibility for how a collection appears to the audience. Usually this power is exercised by the museum staff (there is more on curation later in this article). What is shown and how it is shown depends on the aims and the target audience of the exhibition. Every display includes, in one way or another, an idea of the viewer. As in the digital world, the display of collections in a gallery can be considered from the viewpoint of user-friendliness. A consciously selected and presented exhibition will take into consideration the audience's preliminary knowledge of the items or works, its expectations, needs and learning styles.<sup>7</sup> There is no way to allow for these aspects without audience research and audience participation.

The usability of collections is also affected by all of the information associated with the works, whether online or in a museum. In addition, this interpretation and information is primarily produced by museum professionals, but people from the audience are increasingly invited to participate in the interpretation of collections.

The way objects have been used has a specifically important role when assigning meanings to items with cultural-historical significance. Thus, the experiences and stories of the users are a part of the meaning of items. Great attention has recently been paid to storing intangible heritage<sup>8</sup>. This pertains widely to various fields and institutions of cultural research and museums. The social and aesthetic conventions, rituals and traditions, skills and knowledge, and the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of objects create context for them and help us to understand their meanings. Users provide a

certain kind of hidden knowledge about the objects, and such historical information that museums and academically oriented researchers otherwise cannot uncover.

Narrativity has also been rather common in the interpretation of objects in other ways. Several museums have started projects in which user stories are associated with objects. The stories may concern the history and use of objects and, thus, provide museums with valuable information on their collection. The stories may also be autobiographical memories of viewers that are evoked by the objects. These narratives will thereby support the interpretation of the objects and the development of a personal relationship to the exhibits. Stories from other visitors can give the viewer new perspectives on what they have seen and a broader context, such as the appearance of a similar object or phenomenon in other cultural surroundings.

The Museum of London has been recording the memories and experiences of Londoners since the 1980s (*Life stories and oral history*). The oral-historical collection of the museum contains more than 5,000 hours of recorded interviews and stories. Evidently, the experiences of the residents of the city are an essential part of the museum's collection portraying life in the city and the changes in it. The London Transport Museum is another museum that keeps records of the memories that are associated with its collection. The museum collects these memories continually via its website, where everyone is free to share their memories and read the recollections of others (*Show your memories*).

Industrial design and object design also involve essential factors other than aesthetics and the scope of the display; the experiences of the users of objects and their stories concerning this use have a great significance as well. When it comes to art, we can likewise consider that an artwork does not 'live' as such but what is essential is the reception of the artwork, i.e. its use. Thus, the ways in which viewers understand art and assign meanings to it are an essential part of the content of displays, and this should be appreciated and given space. Emphasising interpretations stresses the notion that a work is not yet complete when it is put on display, but is only assigned a meaning when interpreted by a viewer. Constructing a meaning is, therefore, a process that requires active participation by the viewer.

Interactive technology offers an effective platform for collecting audience contributions. Certain software applications designed for museum use enable visitors to add their personal stories, information and comments to artworks and objects that have been put on display (e.g. Salgado 2009). Museums have used rather distinct methods to distribute this kind of information in displays, but publishing the collection online is one valid choice for the permanent storage and distribution of the information.

Another method of gathering more interpretation contributors is to invite a group of people to examine the collection and make interpretations from their individual viewpoint for other people. Several museums have groups for young people, which organise programmes for their respective age group. These groups meet frequently, work with museum staff and artists, and ponder ways of bringing museum collections to the attention of various audiences and of interpreting the collections to these audiences. *Visual Dialogues*, a programme based on the Tate Gallery's collections, provides the youth groups of regional museums with opportunities to create visual interventions for exhibitions and to design methods and tools that give visitors new perspectives on artworks and opportunities to contribute to the works in one way or another. Centre Pompidou in Paris does this by inviting art schools from various parts of Europe to apply the methods of their art form in order to interpret the museum's collection hangings. As a result of this, the museum arranges evening events at which young artists make proposals for creating connections between various art forms and areas of life.

On a more conceptual level, the participation of the audience in the interpretation process is not restricted to the interpretation of objects in the collection but also concerns interpreting objects *as* a collection. Audience participation in this interpretation process reveals the various ways in which objects and artworks become integral parts of a collection and how a collection is assembled. These various museum narratives can also be processed through curation.

### Curation

Since the audience clearly has a role in interpreting collections in terms of content and information, there is cause to ask whether the audience could also take part in the interpretation of the collection in the role of curator or assistant curator. Many museums have had projects in which outsiders are offered the opportunity to participate in the curation process or otherwise influence the exhibition of collections.

Various exhibitions similar to *People's Choice* have been arranged in museums, often as competitions or polls. Visitors, as part of a larger group, can thus have an impact on which artworks from the collection are put on display. The visitor choice is often made from a range of objects or works pre-selected by the museum staff.

This also applied to the *Love Me or Leave Me* collection display at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki. The display encompassed the most-discussed works from the history of five years of the museum. The first stage of the display consisted of artworks that were known – based on audience feedback, data collected from museum wardens and audience com-

ments conveyed by discussion guides – to have evoked the strongest reactions of admiration or rage from the audience. Thus, instead of thematic, historical or other similar factors, the preferences of lay visitors and a straightforward ‘like/dislike’ approach were chosen as the basis for assembling the collection display. This approach devolved to the audience part of the defining power of museum professionals. The latter part of the display, *Audience selections*, was completely based on the favourites of the audience. This gave even more concrete form to the ‘curatorship’ of the audience. The most loved and hated examples were selected from a database of 120 artworks stored in *Selector*, an interactive computer. Visitors were allowed both to judge the artworks (‘love me’/‘leave me’) and submit their comments. The purpose was thereby also to urge visitors to explain their selections in writing.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to voting, a more ambitious method of providing lay visitors with access to collections is to invite an outside group to assemble an exhibition of a museum’s collection. Participants in this kind of process will be able to present their personal views and will also gain a complete impression of collections activity and the curation process. For the audience, it is always surprising to see the multitude of activities that go on behind the scenes and to participate in a process that requires them to consider the assemblage and content of collections and their conveyance in a new way. It may in turn be surprising for the museum to realise how much information and ideas the audience may have and how many valid arguments the audience may present.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art has long involved outsiders in the curation of collections. Some of the projects have involved children and youngsters. In the *Come to the Edge* project in 1998 a group of older people were involved (O’Donoghue 2003: 85–86). The group held meetings once a week, initially working for three months with two artists and familiarising themselves with the artworks of the collection through various practical workshops. They then worked with the senior curator responsible for the collections and with the museum educator, studying aspects of assemblage and the curation process. They selected a theme, conducted background research, selected the artworks for the display and participated in the installation of the artworks. They also were in charge of the information presented in the display and participated in writing the text for the catalogue.

In a project organised by Kiasma, the residents of the Kivikko city district curated a display with artworks from Kiasma for the public facilities in their area. In this year-long project, workgroups assembled from the schools, youth club, parish and residents’ association of the area familiarised themselves with the various activities and collections of the museum and, as above, selected the works, wrote introductions for them and ‘hosted’ the artworks and associated events in local facilities.

More informal curation is an ongoing Internet process whereby the online community creates various 'art hangings' from collection websites. The Tate Collection, for example, makes this possible in its Your Collection pages, where users can assemble their personal displays from the online collection and share them with other users.

Access to collection databases is a practical prerequisite for audience participation. Suspicions and resistance within the museum may impose ideological barriers to allowing outsider participation in the work of an institution of specialists. Persistent antagonism between vocational expertise and a more democratic approach still exists in the museum field, even though this has been repeatedly shown to be untenable (e.g. Zolberg 1994: 49–65).

Successful projects show that audiences may have much to offer to museums. It would be peculiar to suggest that museum staff members are the only people who are capable of relevant thinking. Collections deal with subjects that relate, in one way or another, to people's lives and experiences. Therefore, people will obviously have thoughts and opinions on them. Curation by audience may introduce completely new perspectives and also question a museum's interpretations of its collection. Moreover, the opportunity to influence and participate in curation shows that the special knowledge and skills needed in museum work are not so esoteric that they cannot be learned. Such activity thereby gains pedagogical and marketing dimensions.

Besides for curation, the audience may also play a part in adding new items to museum collections. Private donations are one form of this, but a museum can also have more strategic connections to its community. Usually the addition of new works and the maintenance of collections is not visible to the audience, and acquisitions are generally the section of museum activity that is most strictly confined to the museum staff. Nevertheless, a museum may also inform the audience of this work by disclosing the grounds for acquisitions and by publishing its collection policy. The principles for adding artworks can also be disclosed through a discussion of subjects related to donation and providing associated directions.<sup>10</sup>

It is specifically important for museums that collect items related to a certain area, group or community that there are experts in the relevant subject themes in the body that decides on acquisitions. The *Re-assessing What We Collect* programme that began at the Museum of London in 2004, aims 'to engage proactively with London's diverse communities and to develop the Museum's collections to reflect and record their heritage'. At the same time, it recontextualises the collection objects and their history.

Ecomuseums, which operate in practical ways as a part of their community, are a case in point.<sup>11</sup> The staff of these kinds of museums may be considered

to focus solely on serving and advising local people, while the members of the community are responsible for decision-making. On the other hand, by referring to this kind of thinking one could argue that all museums are owned by their communities and that ideas, processes and people are as much a part of the content of museum services as the items in a collection. This provides a further argument for the notion that the cultural heritage and the institutions that are responsible for the preserving it should be open to people at all levels.

### **DEVELOPING NEW AUDIENCES – IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIETY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT <sup>12</sup>**

The foregoing discussion examines various methods whereby museums open their collections for the education and enjoyment of the audience and enable the audience to take part in museum life and activities. Museums have recognised, however, that not all people will spontaneously respond to the opportunities offered by museums, but that museums must be active in contacting the public. Collections may also be used as a tool for expanding the audience base and making the audience more committed. Reaching new, non-traditional audiences requires perseverance, and working with a collection gives continuity to this work that otherwise is often based on temporary displays and single customised projects.

The basis for reaching these ‘new audiences’ and the related community or outreach projects lies in the realisation that museum audiences do not represent the demographic structure of the surrounding society. Even if the basic idea was for a museum to belong to everyone, people do not, in practice, embrace their entitlement to culture: visitor surveys repeatedly indicate that museum services are primarily used by comfortably well off, educated people. Groups distinguished by their absence include various minorities, disabled, ethnic and cultural groups, elderly people and the socio-economically deprived. Thus, museums are a reflection of the prevailing structures of society: the people who feel closest to museums are those in a strong societal position. The mere existence of museums that are open to all does not automatically bring people inside. People will only become museum service users by growing accustomed to using them.

Why do museums and cultural institutions evoke feelings of belonging and identification in some people and feelings of being an outsider in others? Pierre Bourdieu explains this phenomenon as a situation that derives from the various layers and fragmentation of society: people’s self-image and *habitus* and the structure of society are more or less mutually compatible. When they do not match, people feel that they are ‘in the wrong place’

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(Bourdieu 1993). This happens when people with no knowledge of museum codes and museum behaviour enter a museum. Bourdieu characterises the attitude whereby the culture of those in a strong societal position is taken as a norm and *desideratum* as symbolic violence: those with power are able to naturalise their own reality and the *status quo* to seem legitimate. According to Bourdieu, education, upbringing and thereby also museums regenerate and maintain the situation.

Carol Duncan presents museums as ritualistic spaces where visitors, by touring the premises, participate in the ritual reinforcement of the prevailing image represented by museums (Duncan 1995). According to Duncan, museums are representations of political and capitalistic power, and stand for a symbolic order that creates hierarchies, whereas touring a museum entails acceptance of this and the performance of a rite. Since museums are no longer required to manifest the power of the Church or Sovereign, they support the construction of community on a symbolic level. For this, rites and cults need to be created so that the *status quo* will prevail, and be maintained and renewed. Duncan agrees that the museum is, therefore, an arena of belonging and exclusion, and is based on a segregation between us (the nation, the intelligentsia, the mainstream, etc.) and them.

Consciousness of unequal participation has increased, and many museums have reacted to influence the situation. Museums have established panels and councils with representatives from groups that have little participation in museum activities. On the other hand, museums have also implemented outreach and regeneration projects in which collections and artists, for example, have been relocated to suburbs and among communities that would not come to a museum spontaneously. Especially in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, museums have worked hard to reach ethnic and cultural minorities. Cultural policy in these countries also requires museums to promote equal participation.

Discussions of museum users and the inclusion of audiences are related to the question of the social purpose of museums: is the purpose of museums to affect the surrounding society and world actively, i.e. is the societal purpose just one of the museum's core tasks, or are societal influences only a possible consequence of other actions? Museums have become increasingly audience-oriented, which has created tension between various views of the role of museums and between various interests. Some museum professionals are afraid that this may happen at the expense of collection management, restoration and research (Ballé & Poulot 2004: 247–249).

According to George E. Hein, a museum is equal to education, and he considers that there is no question of social action by museums (Hein 2005). To support this view, he uses the notion of progressive or constructive learning.

Drawing from Dewey's work, he argues that society needs members who have developed independent and critical thinking, and that there is no other path to change. It is precisely this thinking that the museum supports through its education mission. Particularly in discussions on the position of various minorities, the social purpose of museums is regarded as a priority that collections must support (Sandell 2002). In order to be relevant to their communities, museums may have to reinterpret their collections, for example by exploring narratives or representations of disabled people or ethnic minorities. The new interpretations may challenge not only the museum's own understanding of its collections but also the perception of these groups in society (Dodd *et al.* 2008).

Lois Silverman provides a new perspective on this question by examining museums in the framework of social work (Silverman 2010). Using various examples, she finds numerous elements of social work in the operation of museums, and argues that museums perform social action even when unaware of it. One of the key goals of social work is to influence the life situations and relationships of people with a view to realising some desired change. This has always been a part of what museums do: they enhance interaction between individuals and groups, and the development and expression of identities, they participate in societal movements and campaigns, they affect attitudes, disseminate information and so on. Silverman considers that there is a considerable untapped scope for museums to consciously use their collections for processing various human needs and relationships between people. These include supporting connections between generations or debate on the relationship between genders at various times and in differing cultures.

The Museum of London considers that the foregoing *Life Stories and Oral History* and *Re-assessing What We Collect* projects serve to make people more committed to museum activities and to content production. The empowering effect of participation and opportunities to reinforce connections between generations has also become evident in the course of these projects.

Communal activity sets challenges for museums: establishing connections and reinforcing community commitment requires time and staff who are specialised in this activity. This function is usually assigned to educational departments. The development of community programmes requires types of vocational expertise other than traditional museum work skills, and it also differs from the work done with conventional target groups such as schools. The activity is associated with a broader debate on communities – what they are, how they relate to museums – and cultural diversity and identities. This field is structured differently in various countries but, from the viewpoint of audience work, it is essential that the consideration of diversity is not externally determined to view individuals as representatives of 'otherness'.<sup>13</sup>

Problematization affects the audience work of all museums but particularly the presentation of 'other' cultures (see also Anna Catalani's article in this publication). The Victoria & Albert Museum (London), which presents historical textiles and clothes of Southern Asia in relation to the contemporary population and fashion of this region (Fashioning diaspora space), is an example of a museum that discusses its extra-European collections with its audience. Quai Branly of Paris, in the activities of which it is difficult to find any links between its collections and, for example, immigrants living in France to whose cultural heritage the museum's objects might be linked, is an example of the opposite approach. The differing strategies of museums naturally reflect the broader multicultural policies of the countries. Being remote to users may also be a part of a protectionist academic sentiment. Decisions on the use of collections for the benefit of communities are based on will and choices.

Besides for targeted projects, museums should also pay general attention to how they 'talk': who do they wish welcome, who do they turn away, which kind of forms of interaction do they offer and what do they, in a way, expect from their visitors? There are various unwritten, unspoken rules and presumptions about what should and should not be done in a museum, how one should act and what should not happen there. These presumptions become evident when a visitor who has no experience of a museum institution enters a museum. Such visitors have to ask about matters that the museum does not communicate: unspoken self-evident aspects are not evident to them, but have to be discussed. One of the most essential questions concerning the relationship between a museum and its audience is how it regards these experiences of being an outsider, and how it deals with them and opens the world of the 'insiders' to these new visitors.

Tony Bennett, however, warns museums against being captured by the illusion of unrealistic radicalism. (Bennett 2006: 66). This concept is drawn from Bourdieu, and refers to the 'scholastic illusion' of academic intellectuals according to which a change in thinking also evokes changes in behaviour. Worldview, customs and values are, however, embodied in people; social structures and inequality are so powerfully rooted within us that they cannot be wiped away by mere information and a change in consciousness. This means that a project that brings a new group to a museum will not necessarily achieve any change in individuals and even less in society. Change and (un)learning requires repetition and persistent training. This is also noted by Natalie Heinich in her analysis of visitors to Centre Pompidou (Heinich 1988: 199–212). Incorporating different operations or socially heterogeneous groups may not, as such, produce any changes in behaviour or unite people who would not otherwise be involved with each other socially.

## DEVELOPING PARTICIPATION

For European museums, the 1980s and 1990s especially were a time of opening up to the audience (Ballé & Poulot 2004: 230–249). These decades also saw a remarkable increase in the number of museums. This new orientation towards the audience has introduced new services for the audience, marketing and, at the same time, a division of professional groups. Museum education has developed into a professional activity and has enjoyed even stronger and wider acceptance as a core function of museums.

Whereas in the 1990s the attention was placed on the needs of various user groups and the accessibility of museums, in the new century the focus has broadened to participation and the inclusion of audiences. An audience is not only regarded as the target of educational activity, but also as a participant in and user of museum services. An emphasis on accessibility and participation does not conflict, but the former could rather be regarded as a prerequisite for the latter.

The difference between the approaches can be described with examples of youth participation in museum activities. It is one thing to produce programmes for youngsters, and another to offer them full use of the institution for producing their own programme, as in the above examples. In the former method, youngsters are considered to be an audience, while in the latter they are participants and users. In a participatory approach, visitors are considered sovereign citizens who have something original to say concerning the work of the museum and also have a personal relationship to the content of that work and appreciate the museum's significance in their personal lives and in society. Users of a museum have the complete confidence of the museum to make their own decisions on their personal relationship to the museum. The museum is regarded as a public facility in which museum professionals are not the only ones who are entitled to participate in museum work.

From the viewpoint of a museum user, a museum is not a place for learning new things or acquiring new experiences, but rather a place for bidirectional interaction. Museum users have something to offer the museum, in which they are not there just to take something away. If anything, a visitor is a museum user and participant, whereas the duty of museum professionals is to offer opportunities for self-directed activity and the use of museum resources.

The change in the notion of a museum is comparable to the web 2.0 thinking that has become a symbol of community-oriented content creation. Social media are based on open source principles: both the content and the tools required for content production are available and free to everyone. Content is created through the participation of people, and is in a process of continu-

al change. Open source thinking and community orientation as a new form of activity is not, however, only about online environments, but also about our overall relationship to information, cultural content and organisations.

To illustrate the change, Charles Leadbeater makes a distinction between the world of 'To & For' versus the culture of 'With' (Leadbeater 2009). In the former '(k)nowledge and learning flows from experts to people who are dependent or in need. Organisations are hierarchies based on the power and the knowledge to make decisions. Authority is exercised top down. The aim is to define what people lack – what they need or want that they do not have – and then deliver it to them. The world of To and For starts from people as bundles of needs, rather than, say, as bundles of capabilities and potential.' According to Leadbeater, web 2.0 is creating, by contrast, a culture of 'With', which changes people's relationship to information and to one another.

This change affects the working culture of museums and other organisations. Museums have to shift from dominating content, as they currently do, to becoming service providers of shared content, from possessing and controlling knowledge and expertise to sharing it. They should see themselves as mediators and brokers, rather than authorities. The participatory approach turns people into users and producers instead of audiences and consumers.<sup>14</sup>

One possible way to perceive this change from the viewpoint of the audience is through the concept of *produser*, in which Axel Bruns combines two functions: user + producer (Bruns 2009). This phenomenon as a whole is called *produsage*, collective user-driven content creation. Using a certain service is here also regarded as production, as content is created in a continual process in which various users bring their own contributions to the whole. This kind of activity is especially common in intangible production (publishing, information production and management, games, idea production) but also increasingly in the sharing of material property. Both forms of activity appear to have links to the Collections Mobility 2.0 Project that functions under the auspices of the European Culture Programme (2007–2013).

There is more to new forms of activity than merely developing new technology; Bruns discusses a shift in paradigm. *Produsage* is not confined to mere participation in the production chain, but rather forms a completely new way of thinking, in which the roles of producer, distributor and consumer are combined. This change does not only pertain to the digital world, but is also more far-reaching with impacts on the media in general and also on the economy, education, societal practices and democracy.

In this new culture of operation, the concept of community also requires redefinition. It changes from a predefined and defined-by-outsiders group of

*In order to be relevant  
to their communities,  
museums may have to  
reinterpret  
their collections.*

people or target group into an either self-organised or defined-by-insiders community, or into a temporary operational community focused on a particular phenomenon or service. In both cases, the community is limited in time and has flexible boundaries, enabling people to join or leave the group based on their interests or their situation in life.

At the same time, it is necessary to examine the traditional notion of expertise. Various other forms of expertise must be included in discussions alongside museum expertise to further enhance the production of information and meanings. This cannot be achieved merely by increasing Internet use – in fact many museums use the Internet in the old (web 1.0) manner to disseminate information that has been selected, produced and controlled within the museum. The change will occur in ways of thinking.

Examples of truly participatory actions in cultural institutions are still scarce but they are on the rise. One wide-ranging case, where local people were part of designing programmes around the exhibition was Documenta 12 in Kassel 2007. The event, among other things, invited a local advisory board in the

preparation of the exhibition, and developed a project involving schoolchildren as gallery educators. In addition, professional educators were selected from various backgrounds and were expected to construct their practice on personal approach and active experimentation – in the spirit of what Carmen Mörsch calls transformative discourse of gallery education (Mörsch 2009: 9–31). This type of approach necessarily entails a self-reflective and self-critical understanding of gallery education and the cultural institution.

Another initiative pointing to a new direction could be *The Revisiting Collections* programme (Collections Trust), which attempts to dissolve the dichotomy between the people-focused and collections-focused approaches that have long been considered competing trends in museums. The programme involves education and methods that help to make communities outside museums more committed to collection work. It highlights the needs of users (including potential users) to guide the prioritising of documentation, and shows that the interests of museums and their audience do not conflict. Museums that have applied the programme have been surprised at how much information people outside the museum can add to their collections. They have also found that the programme has created new forms of co-operation between museum departments and among the staff. What is especially interesting in the programme is that it is not confined to offering museum visitors a role as commentators on existing collections, but also allows a diversity of users to participate in the very core of collection work.

The art of ‘With’, produsage or web 2.0 thinking undermines the old notions of control and owning. Even though few museums have embarked on the courses that lead to the most radical changes in their collection work, this direction can already be witnessed. There is work to be done, however, in the practice and development of the ethics of sharing.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 From Article 3 – Definition of Terms, Section 1. Museum. ICOM statutes 2007.
- 2 From Article 3 – Definition of Terms, Section 1. Museum. ICOM statutes 2007.
- 3 Indexing means describing the subject matter of an artwork by a set list of keywords. The indexed works can then be retrieved by a subject-based search on the website.

- 4 The Tate Gallery and the Finnish National Gallery, for example, have both developed a software application for classifying, describing and listing works of art for their own purposes. National cross-institutional databases do exist, however, in several countries.
- 5 John Cotton Dana was working in a library when he was appointed manager of the Newark Museum (New Jersey). He wanted to make museums open for public use in a similar manner to public libraries, and to also loan objects to schools. As a museum manager, he emphasised education and the social role of museums as their most important purposes.
- 6 In copyright issues, *Europeana* takes a strong position in defending the public domain, see European Public Domain Charter.
- 7 A valid presentation of learning styles and of how they can be taken into account in a museum display is provided in Gibbs et al. (2007). For an analysis of which factors affect interpretation, see also Hooper-Greenhill (2000).
- 8 This subject matter attracted a high level of visibility at the ICOM 2004 Conference in Seoul (ICOM News 2004).
- 9 The exhibition was on display from 3 April 2004 to 27 February 2005. More than 50,000 votes were cast and more than 2,000 written comments submitted. The works that attracted the most comments were put on display. The selection (*Love me or leave me*) is still available for viewing on the Internet.
- 10 The Finnish National Gallery, for example, has published a handbook that discusses private wills, donations, and deposits (Hämäläinen 2003).
- 11 For more on ecomuseums and 'new collecting', see Léontine Meijer-van Mensch and Peter Mensch in this publication.
- 12 From Article 3 – *Definition of Terms, Section 1. Museum*. ICOM statutes 2007.
- 13 For a critical analysis of communities and museums, see Witcomb 2003: 79–101.
- 14 Or, as Nicolas Bourriaud (2002:39–40) says, the 'ecstatic consumer' changes into the 'subversive consumer', by which he refers to the way in which artists, DJs and consumers use and customise forms and products to make them their own.

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