

# The Museum as a Laboratory of Change

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*Muzeologia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2023, 11:4:5-20  
doi: 10.46284/mkd.2023.11.4.1

## *The Museum as a Laboratory of Change*

The article deals with the impact of temporary educational exhibitions in Polish national museums on the nature of the knowledge they produce, protect and disseminate. Analysed data were collected during a year-long, qualitative research study with the use of such tools as in-depth interviews, focus groups, research walks and desk analysis of documentation produced during the creation of the *Power of the Museum* exhibition at the National Museum in Krakow. The primary research question is how the museum's ecology of knowledge (Rahder, 2020) reacts when the decision-making order is transformed and a new type of meta-exhibition is built. The article aims to describe the mechanisms that stabilize museum knowledge traditions when the environment in which they operate is changed internally and externally.

Keywords: museum's ecology of knowledge, museum as a laboratory, temporary exhibitions

The formation of the institution of the museum is an important part of the history of collectioning and the emergence of the modern *episteme* based on organised ways of looking and viewing.<sup>1</sup> In museums, people learn to perceive the world, to imagine the past and value it, and to visualise and decode the relationships between objects extracted from socio-cultural and natural reality.<sup>2</sup> Museums are also forms of reification of this reality, as they create models of what is important and worth preserving in a given culture. Then they become “temples” protecting artefacts that are considered heritage in a space where time is suspended.<sup>3</sup> However, they sometimes also happen to be agents of change, when they take on the function of a “forum” and are organised as inviting places that facilitate opening a dialogue about community, belonging, identification or power relations and principles of representation.<sup>4</sup>

Discussions about the role of museums in Poland in the recent decades can be viewed as successive attempts to position museums between the above poles. The turn to education,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CRARY, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999; POPCZYK, Maria. *Estetyczne przestrzenie ekspozycji muzealnych*. Kraków: Universitas, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> LIVINGSTONE, David. *Putting Science in Its Place. Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> DUNCAN, Carol. *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. London: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> DUNCAN, Carol. *Civilizing rituals...*; SKUTNIK, Jolanta. *Muzeum sztuki współczesnej jako przestrzeń edukacji*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> SZELAĞ, Marcin (ed.). *Edukacja muzealna w Polsce. Sytuacja, kontekst, perspektywy rozwoju. Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej w Polsce*. Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zbiorów, 2012.

the concept of the critical,<sup>6</sup> participatory or relational museum<sup>7</sup> are expressive initiatives of designing facilities that, while still performing the functions of collecting and preserving collections, focus on co-shaping sociocultural reality. Despite the diverse sources of inspiration influencing various trends and proposals,<sup>8</sup> they relate directly to the demands of the New Museology and change the hierarchies of the basic functions of museums.<sup>9</sup> Specific exhibitions carried out in the spirit of working with and for the benefit of the community move the museum in the scope of culture towards the position similar to that occupied by laboratories in the 19th century with regard to nature.<sup>10</sup> They regulate the movement between their interiors and exteriors, enculturating objects of various types and subjecting them to a certain social arrangement, and then through research and exhibition experiments produce knowledge to induce change in the world outside them as well.<sup>11</sup>

Research organised around exhibitions and museums designed and conceived in this manner addresses not only the artefacts deemed valuable to the institution but also the nature of the audience, the mechanisms of perceiving and receiving the exhibition,<sup>12</sup> and the social environment of the institution.<sup>13</sup> The exhibitions prepared on the basis of this research address topics related to the processes of knowledge production regarding artefacts and reveal the relationship between the strategies of creating collections and exhibitions and the participatory and “epistemological functions of the museum”.<sup>14</sup>

Museums remain places of production and presentation of knowledge about the past and the present, which, by establishing hierarchies of values for this knowledge, shape the nature of memory policies while programming the cultural future. This continuity of functions is combined with changes in the knowledge environment in museums. In this context, Graham Black<sup>15</sup> notes that the creation of contemporary museum exhibitions is tainted with constant conflict between the construction of meanings that support specific knowledge traditions and efforts to preserve pluralism and social inclusion through engaging the viewer as an active creator of content at every level of the museum experience. Hooper-Greenhill, on the other hand, pointed out from the historical perspective that: “the realities of museums have changed many times. Museums have always had to modify how they worked, and what they did,

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<sup>6</sup> PIOTROWSKI, Piotr. *Muzeum krytyczne*. Warszawa: Rebis, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> BYSZEWSKI, Janusz, PARCZEWSKA, Maria. *Muzeum jako rzeźba społeczna*. Warszawa: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> BISHOP, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London; New York: Verso, 2012; SIMONE, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> FOLGA-JANUSZEWSKA, Dorota. History of the Museum Concept and Contemporary Challenges. In: *Muzealnictwo*. Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zbiorów, 2020, pp. 37–59.

<sup>10</sup> In this context, Janusz Byczewski and Maria Parczewska’s Creative Education Laboratory (Laboratorium Edukacji Twórczej) is not just a metaphor, but can be referred to the scheme that organizes any laboratory space (BYSZEWSKI, Janusz, PARCZEWSKA, Maria. *Muzeum...*).

<sup>11</sup> KOHLER, Robert. *Landscapes and Labsapes: Exploring the Lab-Field Border in Biology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> GAROIAN, Charles R. Performing the Museum. In: *Studies in Art Education*. Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2001, pp. 234–248.

<sup>13</sup> JEFFERS, Carol. Museum as Process. In: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Champaign: UI Press, 2003, pp. 107–119.

<sup>14</sup> MOSER, Stephanie. The Devil is in the Detail. Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge. In: *Museum Anthropology*, Arlington: American Anthropological Association, 2010, pp. 22–32; JAGODZIŃSKA, Krystyna. *Witryna z zabawkami: Testowanie muzeum partycypacyjnego*. Kraków: Muzeum Zabawek Kraków, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> BLACK, Graham. *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century*. Milton Park Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

according to the context, the plays of power, and the social, economic, and political imperatives that surrounded them.”<sup>16</sup>

Recognising or supporting the above trends rarely goes hand in hand in contemporary museological studies, with in-depth analyses focused on how the positioning and use of a particular temporary exhibition as a laboratory of change within a particular epistemic framework affects thinking about what is the knowledge that is protected and transmitted by a museum institution. The following study is intended to complement the state of research in this area. This article was written as a result of research work on the ecology of knowledge<sup>17</sup> at the National Museum in Krakow, which we conducted in 2021 with Agata Cabala in connection with the exhibition *The Power of the Museum (Moc muzeum)*. From January to December 2021, we conducted 10 focus interviews with educators—curators, the exhibition coordinator, educators from various museums in Krakow, exhibition curators from the National Museum in Krakow, conservators working on *The Power of the Museum (Moc muzeum)* exhibition, the exhibition coordinator, the head of the National Museum Prevention Department, and teachers working in the Decks of Culture (*Pokłady Kultury*) program. We also conducted three interviews with the exhibition’s keepers. Conversations were conducted via the MS Teams platform and in person (as much as possible when security rules during the COVID-19 pandemic applied). Each interview was recorded and transcribed. In addition, a curatorial tour was recorded and transcribed. An integral part of the study was direct observations of workshops prepared by museum educators. We tried to recognise the spectrum of perspectives from which the exhibition is viewed, the diversity of information it has produced and the practices it has initiated. By analysing the files documenting the creation of the exhibition, the narratives associated with the curatorial tours, the documentation of the exhibition and the commentary on the exhibition in the form of *The Power of the Museum Anti-Guide (Antyprzewodnik po wystawie Moc muzeum)*, we also tried to trace the relationship between the process of creating the exhibition and the situation in which it began to function as an autonomous whole.

The exhibition cited here has become a key to understanding the way the museum functions as a complex knowledge environment in which discursive practices themselves are discursivised. This recurrence was inherent in the very nature of the exhibition that showed the process of creation and reception of museum exhibition spaces. Our research on “knowledge about knowledge”<sup>18</sup> was combined with an analysis of the process of creating a temporary exhibition about exhibitions.

The museum, in the perspective adopted here, is an institution that organises the complex, polycentric, diverse and often disordered knowledge environment of the modern world. This institution manages knowledge in modern societies, producing a separate, partially isolated internal environment and controls the flow zones between its interior and exterior. Thus, it is close to the aforementioned laboratory, created as one of the spaces for the production and

<sup>16</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2015, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> “Ecology of Knowledge” is an epistemic framework used by Micha Rahder to describe and incorporate many other epistemic frameworks into her analysis. It is a form of conducting research - and not an object, place or space. “Ecology of Knowledge” is characterized by paying unique attention to the fact that every form of knowledge, the way it is produced, transmitted and used, emerges from a network of complex relationships and intra-actions between human minds, bodies, institutions, documents, technologies and more-than-human landscapes (RAHDER, Micha. *An Ecology of Knowledges: Fear, Love, and Technoscience in Guatemalan Forest Conservation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> STRATHERN, Marilyn. *Relations: An Anthropological Account*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

accumulation of modern knowledge, alongside such institutions as the zoo, botanical garden, hospital or observatory. The history of the museum from this perspective can be perceived as the history of the creation of conditions for the production of knowledge, the protection of this knowledge or its dissemination. Ultimately, the activities of museums were organised around practices such as acquiring objects and creating collections, preserving and conserving, organising and describing collections, conducting research, exhibiting collections, displaying the results of research and providing educational activities. Thus, the museum is an institution that transforms objects, words and ideas into knowledge and then reconnects them to the social and natural order, while controlling the nature of these connections. At the same time, it is a knowledge environment with well-defined boundaries, institutionally organised which exists in a network of relationships with other knowledge environments – scientific, artistic, activist, collector and local communities – that are organised from the bottom up.

In this context the art museum occupies a distinct position. It is a place that allows for practicing the scientific disciplines and creating forms of administration in the field of art history and historic preservation, yet it extends to other areas (history, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, neuropsychology, pedagogy, etc.). However, the knowledge transferred by the institution reaches further, beyond scientific knowledge and educational activities that translate into conservation, research and exhibition practices. This also involves procedural knowledge of bureaucratic norms and – not publicly communicated – technical instructions that allow the creation of the exhibition as a meaningful space around which are organised the practices of transmission of the knowledge produced and recorded in the scope of the temporary exhibition. It must be added that the national museum is a special case of an institution that cares for a large collection of exceptional importance; at the same time, its structure is very complex and expressively hierarchical at the level of knowledge and power relations.

In the epistemic traditions and frameworks we have studied, the exhibition is a multisensory space that is also a complex message. It is a convention that spatialises knowledge and uses recordings between several sign systems (visual, phonetic, semantic, symbolic<sup>19</sup>). The exhibition is at the same time treated as a repository, a spatialised knowledge and a program – a set of rules to make sense of the experience based on looking and walking. On the other hand, the objects organised in the form of exhibitions are the primary carriers of the knowledge being conveyed (often of autotelic value, and here also constituting a metonymy of the nation's history). Therefore, in analysing *The Power of the Museum* exhibition as a laboratory of change, I will use semiotic tools compatible with the above means of conceptualising the exhibition.

I define knowledge in a museum situation as anything that is shared, mutually communicated, disseminated or concealed within exhibition and exhibition-related forms of communication. The knowledge may be pre-conceptual and derived from how the human body functions in the world and in the museum. In this sense, knowledge has its origins in individual forms of experiencing reality and exposure, which, when passed on, can be referred to as action and memory programs.<sup>20</sup> Memory becomes knowledge only when it is transformed into a shared value that is organised, stored and transmitted according to certain conventionalised dispositions.<sup>21</sup> These dispositions allow for the stabilisation of “knowledge traditions,” that is,

<sup>19</sup> FOLGA-JANUSZEWSKA, Dorota. *Muzeum: Fenomeny i problemy*. Kraków: Universitas, 2015, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> ŁOTMAN, Jurij, USPIEŃSKI, Borys. O semiotycznym mechanizmie kultury. In: JANUS, Elżbieta, MAYE-NOWA, Maria Renata (eds.). *Semiotyka kultury*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1997, pp. 147–170.

<sup>21</sup> GOMÓŁA, Anna. Kulturowa rola pamięci i jej historia utrwalona w polszczyźnie. In: ADAMOWSKI, Jan, WÓJ-CICKA, Marta (eds.). *Pamięć jako kategoria rzeczywistości kulturowej*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2012, pp. 61–74.

the relatively economised instruments for producing and transmitting specific information; the forms that this information takes and the ways to transmit it; the codes that organise it and allow it to be decoded. The knowledge tradition itself can be both a repository and a program for organising the world, acting on it, and thinking about it.<sup>22</sup> A museum exhibition understood as a space filled with meanings is such a tradition, and at the same time – especially when we focus on temporary exhibitions – it can be a laboratory of change for this tradition.

From this perspective, which allows us to discuss knowledge about knowledge and exhibitions about exhibitions, it is possible to study the emerging and already functioning mechanisms of models of continuity and change in the nature of museum knowledge in the situation of the emergence of the specific factor of meta-reflection and self-description of the exhibition perceived as a system of representation.

### Reversing the order

*The Power of the Museum* is a temporary exhibition, and nowadays temporary exhibitions are becoming spaces and programs of innovation. They often result from specific research projects and are involved with experiments in new educational ideas. By their very nature, they allow for a tighter intertwining of the ongoing activities of producing scientific knowledge and generating new knowledge from participatory activities with the expository form of administration. They can also be considered as a way to respond to current trends and tendencies.

Creating temporary exhibitions offers an opportunity to go beyond organisational patterns, including the attempts, increasingly popular in Poland, to have educators take over the role of curators. It is often through these types of bold efforts that museums undergo transformation and become increasingly accessible.<sup>23</sup> Temporary exhibitions are used as marketing tool and as ways to increase attendance and revenue, but they also create a relatively safe place to experiment with new ways of thinking about the museum's role in the immediate social environment. Thus, they allow museums to become involved in ongoing discussions about the challenges of the modern world and provide an opportunity to make museums agents of social change.

*The Power of the Museum* is an example of this kind of temporary exhibition. It proved to be a comprehensive laboratory for changing the knowledge environment at the level of conceptual, organisational, staging and educational work. Its creation required a partial reversal of the structural order prevailing at the National Museum in Krakow. The mechanism of this cultural phenomenon has been worked out by cultural anthropologists focused on the theory of ritual. The hallmarks of this kind of play on norms, values and symbols include a rejection of existing hierarchies, a focus on the process rather than the effect of the work, the minimisation of differences between participants in the process, getting rid of thinking in terms of ownership and autonomy, and appreciation of fun and frivolity. Reversal rituals are often accompanied by profanity, mixing the profound with the mundane and seriousness with laughter.<sup>24</sup> The above-mentioned symptoms were noticeable when visiting *The Power of the Museum* and when analysing the dynamics of exhibition creation.

<sup>22</sup> BARTH, Fredrik. An Anthropology of Knowledge. In: *Current Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 1–18.

<sup>23</sup> TZORTZI, Kali, KOUKOUVAOU Katerina. Temporary Museum Exhibitions as Tools for Cultural Innovation. In: KAVOURA, Androniki, KEFALLONITIS, Efstathios, GIOVANIS, Apostolos (eds.). *Strategic Innovative Marketing and Tourism*. Cham: Springer, 2019, pp. 57–65.

<sup>24</sup> TURNER, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2017.

Let us start with creating an inventory of the basic levels at which the work on exposure reversed the structural order of the institution, becoming a model laboratory of change at the organisational level. First, there is the gesture of entrusting the role of curators to educators, which has reversed previous hierarchies of knowledge and the ways in which it is transmitted. In the current models of exhibition production at the National Museum of Krakow, it is the curators who act as scholars, presenting the results of their research in accordance with certain permanent rules of museum presentation. Educators, on the other hand, remain translators converting the provided content into forms accessible to particular audiences. The educational program is a superstructure for the exhibition, understood as a form of presentation of objects and knowledge about the objects or topics to which these objects relate. *The Power of the Museum* was a project in which educators took their place at the centre of the exhibition-making process and bear responsibility for producing, organising and transmitting knowledge at all stages and through all available media.

Another shift was related to the replacement of a single person being responsible for the content layer (curators who customarily work individually or in small groups) with a collective body – a team of educators cooperating and negotiating the final shape and tone of the exhibition among themselves and representatives of other departments. The shift in the area of knowledge production from the individual subject to the collaborative subject working on the exhibition as a result of dialogue created great potential for free manipulation of symbols, conventions and content. According to the curators of *The Power of the Museum*, developing a common perspective mediating between diverse sensibilities, ideas, experiences and areas of expertise was an intense undertaking of social imagination. We understand this undertaking, following David Graeber, as the part of everyday life that involves “trying to decipher what other people are feeling and driven by”.<sup>25</sup> This allowed for the reconciliation and consolidation of new reference points. In the case studied, this process occurred primarily among educators but the applied dialogical model influenced the forms of cooperation and alignment of perspectives with representatives of other museum departments, as well as the creation of a specific model of the viewer and of reception of art.

In addition to reversing the order associated with the institutional layer of exhibition production, *The Power of the Museum* from the outset was an attempt to create an exhibition aligned with the trends of the educational turn, but also the one that pays attention to the findings of research on the development of museum audiences. It placed the recipient at the centre, and the main criterion for its quality was accessibility and inclusiveness. It manifested itself in the application of universal design standards and, above all, in the adaptation of message forms and content to the widest possible audience. The goal of educators in the function of curators became that no one at the exhibition should feel excluded because of the formula adopted.

The last of the reversals designed by the curatorial team can be placed at the level of the development of the exhibition theme. The gesture of making the core motif of the exhibition a device for producing meanings and organising bodily forms of interacting with cultural artefacts was to bring the popular contemporary form of meta-commentary to its liminal form. The language of the exhibition has been used by educators taking roles of curators in such a way that it can unveil itself, comment and open the viewer to what usually remains the

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<sup>25</sup> GRAEBER, David. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2016.

unnoticed framework of the ritualised way of receiving a work of art. *The Power of the Museum* itself was a meta-commentary and a program of change regarding the exhibition as part of the museum's knowledge environment.

## Forms and meanings

Cultural practices of reversing the order are often unsustainable and instead of performing a transformative function they perpetuate the existing structure. On the other hand, it should be noted that they open up the possibility of change by initiating the collective work of imagination often frozen in the thicket of bureaucratic procedures sustained by a certain hierarchy of power. In this article, however, I am not interested in the long-term effects caused by the exhibition as a laboratory of change and its impact on organisational structures. I also do not want to open a discussion on how to perpetuate these transformations. Instead, I am interested in what this change reveals and how the knowledge environment reacts to it. This is because I found that specific shifts in the area of organisational practice and the construction of a particular form of hierarchical knowledge transmission caused different kinds of discussions. Reconstructing the broad spectrum of reactions to the exhibition talking about exhibitions – both in the process of designing and building it and in summarising the results of the collaboration – allowed a better understanding of the semiotic–material dynamics that simultaneously ensure the sustainability of the museum's knowledge environment and enable its change.

The first level of discussion triggered by the intentional reversal of the above-mentioned orders included themes related to the collections and ways of presenting their value in the form of exhibitions. Curator–educators have repeatedly highlighted – through official messages, curatorial walks, workshops and in conversations with us – the importance of explaining that an art exhibition is created as a statement in a heavily codified language based on rules that are sometimes overt and sometimes hidden and internalised by creators and viewers. This resonated with the adopted curatorial strategy, which consisted largely in unveiling, commenting on and changing the rules governing the creation of the exhibition at the level of the criteria for selecting and ordering the works, as well as building a multi-sensory perceived spatial message.

Creating an exhibition in the form of a meta-commentary, where the language of the exhibition has been a means to talk about the language of the exhibition, was an important starting point to address the influence of the form of the exhibition on the process of decoding meanings and to address the relationship between these orders in museum environment. This is explicitly articulated, among others, by Dorota Jedruch in the *Anti-Guide*, noting that “In museum practice, one usually seeks a method of exhibiting art in which a curator is as much absent as possible and the work is as present as possible. And in our exhibition, the artists' works are pieces of a puzzle in which they sometimes play a secondary role”.<sup>26</sup> This can be supplemented by another, less formal statement: “this exhibition is not the result of a scientific study of a group of collections, but of a scientific study concerning exhibitions”.<sup>27</sup> Educators in the role of curators also often pointed to the need to look at the exhibition as a message and the importance of asking what ways this message can be experimented with. Conversations within the team of educator–curators were focused on methods to present the exhibition as a specific language that can be learned by knowing the rules that organise it. This shift in the

<sup>26</sup> GRZELAK, Anna, JEJDRUCH, Dorota, KAPRALSKI, Sławomir, KUNIŃSKA, Magdalena, MACHETA, Danuta, MRUGAŁA, Katarzyna, SENDYKA, Roma, SKOWRON, Filip, SZCZERSKI, Andrzej, ZAGUŁA, Joanna. *Antyprzewodnik po wystawie Moc muzeum*. Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> RAoMM EK 17 (Research Archive of *Moc Muzeum* – transcription corpus - paragraph).

level of reflection served an educational purpose: unveiling the form simultaneously became a way of learning it. The exhibition “was built to make the visitor familiar with the museum”.<sup>28</sup>

This approach, as already mentioned, sparked discussion in many departments, both during the creation of the exhibition and at the level of evaluating its effects. With the change within the formula of the organisation and nature of the exhibition, separate voices emerged at the level of official and unofficial assessments. Comments on the shifts described can be divided into the following types:

- 1) pointing out the dangers of blurring the criteria for valuing a museum collection;
- 2) addressing the problem of the appropriate form and choice of meta-exposure topics taken; and
- 3) applying the question of the relevance of the artwork to curatorial practice.

All of them were reflections on the function and value of the object itself at a time when the exhibition and the accompanying process of its creation focused on various ways of contextualising and decontextualising the work.

For an exhibition conceived as a system of representation with specific modalities of relations between code, content, objects and various visual signs, the educator–curator experiment was a question of the extent to which form, artefact and transmitted content influence one other, and to what extent they remain independent. This experiment resulted in two standpoints. The first of these was constructivist, according to which knowledge in the museum experience is created dynamically and in the web of relations. The meanings of objects are not permanent, and formal and thematic changes can affect the nature of objects in their relationship to the spatial relationship of people associated with them. The second standpoint involved naturalising objects as individual, authentic and autotelic carriers of values and meanings. Knowledge of these objects in this perspective can be discovered or hidden, available or unavailable, presented correctly or falsely. The common field delineated by the epistemic framework encompassing both standpoints concerns the belief that the form of the exhibition, the artefacts and the content conveyed influence one another and impact the meanings communicated.

### Artefacts and content

The second level of discussion stems from the findings of some of the employees that emerged during the interviews. *The Power of the Museum* defends the thesis that there is no single correct form of exhibition to convey a particular content. Such a viewpoint seems paradoxical in the context of the argument presented a moment ago. However, it makes sense when we consider that this is an exhibition that focuses not on the objects and their relationship to the arrangement, classification and perception layers but on building a message around the idea that an exhibition is the relationship of objects to these layers. This shift changes the status of the work of art as a knowledge-bearing artefact.

Educators, in their role of curators, admitted that they “put these objects together a bit provocatively, because, of course, there are exhibitions that arrange items thematically, around islands, issues. Chronology in museums is not always present. There are quite a few exhibitions that break with it on certain levels. We sometimes arranged items in a rogue fashion”.<sup>29</sup> All

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<sup>28</sup> RAoMM K 27.

<sup>29</sup> RAoMM EK 54.



participants in the process recognised that they were touching one of the main axes that organise museums' orders of knowledge: "we agreed to a project that perhaps sometimes treats exhibits from its own collection in a controversial manner".<sup>30</sup>

This strategy resonated with discussions on the selection of works which took place within departments and between them. Discussions often veered to highlighting the need to protect the object and arguing in favour of exhibitions that capture artefacts or natural objects as essential things on their own. One voice interestingly follows the paradox of *The Power of the Museum* in its complicated relationship to the exhibits: "to me it is of great value that some of these objects can simply be shown".<sup>31</sup> For the employee quoted here, the subordination of the work to a specific theme did not prevent the appreciation of the object itself. At the same time, during discussions with another department, there were negotiations about whether an object of real importance and significance should be exhibited outside of a context showing its unique value ("the object has been used as part of a mosaic, not as a value in itself, and the significance it had was not presented"<sup>32</sup>).

The stake in these discussions in the museum knowledge environment is the status of the work in relation to the status of the content conveyed in the exhibition. This situation is permeated by the belief, diagnosed earlier, that form and content are inextricably linked, and objects can lose value or be undervalued if the form is inappropriate for them. Educator-curators, while building an exhibition about an exhibition and focusing on the role of the language of the exhibition in the formation of meanings and audience profiles, at the same time evoke the question of whether specific content can actually be conveyed through various objects and creative ways of formally attaching specific meanings to them. Or perhaps the content is variable, and it is the objects that remain the medium leading to "true knowledge"?

The oft-appearing insistence on the value of the work itself is combined with the modern museum episteme which separates objects that are new from those which are old, the real from the replicas, and those representing something in a series from those meaningful as isolated wholes.<sup>33</sup> The object stabilises form and content and is the main organising instance of "real knowledge" as well as the form of its transmission. Educator-curators, on the other hand, seem to present a position in which content is the most important point of reference and can be conveyed through different texts and different coding options.

Behind this intricate web of assumptions about the exhibition as a system of representations with certain constitutive features, there is another common belief regarding the persistence of the so-called code memory, which allows artefacts to be recognised as valuable despite their recontextualisation.<sup>34</sup> Any conversation about objects in relation to the exhibition strategy of *The Power of the Museum* is a way of stabilising that code, at the point where it is used to tell a story about itself. The discussion allows maintenance of the continuity and hierarchy of knowledge when, within the framework of an expository system of representation, the form is recognised as the determinant of content, and the object is recognised as the means leading to the presentation of that content.

<sup>30</sup> RAoMM KO 11.

<sup>31</sup> RAoMM K 11.

<sup>32</sup> RAoMM KON 10.

<sup>33</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums...*, p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> ŁOTMAN, Jurij, USPIEŃSKI, Borys. *O semiotycznym mechanizmie...*

## Object and body

Another change designed by the educator–curators is to break the ritualised form of visiting, to encourage spontaneity within the viewer, and to use the language of the exhibition to unveil the corporeal aspect of the museum experience, which is often based on disciplining the viewer in such a way as to orchestrate the cognitive process around the sense of sight connected directly to the intellect.<sup>35</sup> The creators of the exhibition deliberately created a situation in which they revealed that all the senses participate in the reception and interpretation of the exhibition, and that even the place where the images are hung is a decision from the scope of shaping the arrangements of our bodies as receptors of visual stimuli. The room that directly concerned the relationship of the body to space was a place for experiments: on the height at which paintings were hung, the angles at which they were arranged, and placing additional set pieces that allowed the body to be put in positions not associated with the reception of museum works. The curators, aware of the game they are playing with habits, described it as follows:

we want to focus attention on our bodies and in what way they influence our perception, our thinking, our behaviour in a given space. When talking about this hall, we sometimes start with a performance by Zorka Wollny, who a few years ago invited dancers and recorded the way they imitate the behaviour of visitors.<sup>36</sup>

The discussion prompted by the arrangement described here helps establish the impassable limits of this experiment. These are set by an ethic of conservationist care. Collection care specialists and exhibition supervisors controlled the framework of interaction with objects and modelled corporeal forms of reception, first at the level of selecting display solutions and later at the level of policing the autonomy of objects. The criterion at a starting point has always been related to the safety of the work exposed to mechanical and biochemical damage and decay processes. The museum's exclusion of an object from the world with the goal of stopping time and entropy has a long tradition, but institutionally and scientifically it took the current familiar shape in the early twentieth century with the emergence of the function of collection care specialists with scientific knowledge of physics and chemistry. This led to greater control of the environment where artefacts are stored and displayed in terms of, for example, lighting and humidity.

The museum as a place for preserving collections has a lot in common with laboratory spaces, but on a different level than has been exposed so far in this text. This is the place where environmental conditions are produced and controlled that allow objects to function as stable artefacts existing outside of time. Thus, museums create a clear dividing line: on one side is man and nature, and on the other is heritage and artwork, which must be preserved by radically excluding it from the domain of social and natural phenomena, only to include it again in a moment, but under highly controlled conditions. “These are our requirements, we just won't give up some things for the sake of artistic vision”<sup>37</sup> – this quote indicates the importance and significance of activities that are part of the institution's protective mission at the level of material heritage conservation.

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<sup>35</sup> O'DOHERTY, Brian. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> RAoMM EM 110.

<sup>37</sup> RAoMM KON 36.

However, in the discussion triggered by the attempt to fund a sphere that allows bodies to realise themselves in relation to the object and space, we are interested in the emergence of a set of arguments regarding the real impact of such an action on the situation of the recipient. At a basic level, we are still dealing with the use of the force of regulations to control bodies in the museum environment. This makes the relationship between the visitor and the object within the act of viewing the exhibition remain a highly ritualised activity. In turn, this ritualisation, involving the elimination of danger from visitors, is linked to the conventions of the visit at the museum as an act of disembodied looking. Saving the past and producing an oculo-centric subject have long gone hand in hand.<sup>38</sup>

Visitors, even when experiencing their own corporeality, experience it in relation to the artefact only through the medium of sight. From this angle, another game of educator–curators with visitor perception related to stimulating other senses – smell, hearing, touch – turns out to expose the boundaries of the relationship between object and viewer. Spontaneity and multisensoriality as modalities of museum cognition used at interactive narrative exhibitions come from a different order than the works themselves. The duality that is created can be explained by the insoluble dilemma that *The Power of the Museum* reveals – in what way can objects excluded from time, society and nature be included again by transcending the models of gaze-based forms of relationship building and knowledge transfer? In curatorial practice, this dilemma is transcended by creating situations of collaborative collection building and co-curatorial practices with local communities whose voices are given equal weight to those of experts. In the same way, the educational program serves to integrate new methods of presenting the knowledge into the described environment of knowledge. The gesture of disengaging and reengaging the object in knowledge circuits while maintaining partial isolation underlines another common ground in the described knowledge environment.

### Textbook and exercise book

If you take a look at *The Power of the Museum Anti-Guide* (*Antyprzewodnik po wystawie Moc muzeum*) you will notice a principle that connects it to the exhibition itself. Artworks, illustrations and texts are arranged in a set of exercises that allow you to test how a museum exhibition works in practice. At the exhibition itself, visitors also find a whole host of tasks that puts them in the role of an active subjects who confront their experience, knowledge, attitudes and competencies with the topics proposed by the educator–curators. The human body is a theme in the gallery space and the visitor is encouraged to think about this, for example, by journalling; the *Anti-Guide* provides a diary space in which to do this. At the exhibition, however, visitors do not observe examples that illustrate the curator's theses: they test the selected solutions themselves.

These endeavours lead to another goal that educators-as-curators wanted to achieve. They created an exhibition not only about exhibitions but one that also incorporates the experience of museum visitors in the perimeter of their own self-reflection. This theme came up repeatedly during the curatorial tour:

*The Power of the Museum* is the power of the visitors themselves, namely all of us. We, visiting the exhibition, are becoming part of it. Our bodies, our minds, our memories, our life

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<sup>38</sup> CRARY, Jonathan. *Suspensions...*, pp. 11–79.

experiences, our education – this is what we bring to a museum exhibition and this shapes our perception.<sup>39</sup>

I will not pay particular attention here to embedding these thoughts in the constructivist model of museum education.<sup>40</sup> Instead, I would like to point out that the above shift can be interpreted as a change in thinking about the exhibition as a model for organising and transferring knowledge. The exercise book in this sense replaces the anthology and the canon.

Thinking of the exhibition as an anthology combines with centring it around the artefacts and their autotelic value. It also organises the modality of museum knowledge along the line running from discovering the work of art to discovering the principles that emerge from specific realisations put together. This model clarifies the nature of the discussions associated with the earlier planes of change and correspondence. When curators advocate treating the artwork as central, they recognise it as the axis of the organisation of the code and the content conveyed. In this perspective, code and content emerge from objects as knowledge objectified through the lens of aesthetics, art history or other scientific disciplines.

In my opinion, the important remark by Andrzej Szczerski found in the *Anti-Guide* was formulated based on these standpoints:

curators, abandoning the role of authorities speaking ex cathedra in the name of equal discussion with the public, only maintain appearances. They still remain the ones who are more important – they are the ones who determine the terms of the debate, as the authors of both the questions asked in the surveys and, most importantly, the exhibition itself.<sup>41</sup>

While the statement is about the power of curators, it is closely related to responsibility for works. From this perspective, curators are not subjects of knowledge who create rules and principles of reception, nor do they establish any valid systems of values. They are the ones who reveal them. The power of curators is first and foremost the power of the works. Curators are their representatives.

*The Power of the Museum* gives curators the powers of rule-makers and commentators. This gesture involves a shift from thinking about anthologies to thinking about exercise books. Herein hides another paradox. The exhibition unveils the language of the museum exhibition and allows the viewer to acquire competences related to the use of this language, but at the same time it shows its generative power – the exhibition is normative; it establishes and stabilises new, more open, more dynamic (but still existing) rules for interacting with art.

The shift in focus here shows the dynamics of the knowledge environment, which starts to be conceptualised as a system of naturalised rules. When they are discursive, some members of the museum team consider these rules inviolable or secondary, putting the artworks back in the foreground. This oscillation between treating an exhibition as a system of rules and treating an exhibition as a collection of valuable artefacts is an attempt to stabilise the relationship between form and meaning in a situation where form has been presented as meaning-making and objects are subordinated to it. Statements that insist on the legitimacy of one of the above orders, and thus also one model of the relationship between words, contexts and objects at the level of official messages and unofficial conversations, enables greater flexibility in the process

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<sup>39</sup> RAoMM O 2.

<sup>40</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance*. Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> GRZELAK, Anna, JĘDRUCH, Dorota, KAPRALSKI, Sławomir, KUNIŃSKA, Magdalena, MACHETA, Danuta, MRUGAŁA, Katarzyna, SENDYKA, Roma, SKOWRON, Filip, SZCZERSKI, Andrzej, ZAGUŁA, Joanna. *Antyprzewodnik...*

of creating exhibitions, which, in the epistemic frame described above, is always a process of adjusting the stabilising code to the object while maintaining the underlying meanings and values of the exhibits. As long as the exposition can be good or bad, can contain errors or be devoid of them, the above mechanism works and allows to ensure the continuity of knowledge with shifts between code (exercise book) or object (anthology).

## Recipients and visitors

The shifts described above are also combined with a change in thinking about the recipient. The findings of the research taking place in proximity to *The Power of the Museum* are part of a much larger discussion in this context regarding the formation of perceiving the visitor in terms of dialogue, participation, conversation and co-creation of exhibitions. This discussion has a long tradition all over the world and in Poland.

*The Power of the Museum* was addressed to everyone. This audience might be considered too broad, but the exhibition's creators consciously argued for this kind of profiling of the exhibition. The first argument concerned the accessibility and openness of the museum institution, while the second was related to the desire to grow attendance and open up to the diversity of visitors. At a basic level, it can be considered one of many contemporary ways of bridging the deep gap between the practices of museum professionals and the practices of visitors, which Hooper-Greenhill, among others, has written about:

The experience of the museum, its collections, and its specialist processes, was different on either side of this divide. The lack of knowledge of the work of the curator constituted the visitor as ignorant and the curator as expert in respect of the collections.<sup>42</sup>

The analyses of the collected materials indicate that the team's discussion regarding the audience triggered by *The Power of the Museum* was organised on the axis of creator/commentator, amateur/specialist, everyone/chosen one. In many statements the visitor was either the one who evaluated, verified and pointed out mistakes or the one who learned, experienced and underwent change. In our view, this constant oscillation between the two extremes made it possible to perceive the exposition simultaneously as a repository and as a curriculum, regardless of shifts regarding the status of knowledge itself, the modality of representation and its secondary hierarchies.

The oscillation between the two extreme audience models outlined here hides something more – thinking about the relationship between the world of the exhibition and the world outside it. Each institution delineates own boundaries, marks the inside and outside, and then puts them into general categories. The laboratory of change we study here is an attempt to negotiate these boundaries. The exhibition was intended to be a mediator between the museum community and the visitor community. *The Power of the Museum* shortened that distance while teaching the visitor that the museum is a place in which to feel comfortable. Model museum visitors who are non-specialists can gain knowledge in an area previously unknown to them.

The democratisation of institutions and the policy of making knowledge available, combined with this conception of the recipient, is linked to the conceptualisation of the world outside the institution as a place that can be changed for the better. When boundaries become somewhat fluid, actions taken by institutions can affect the entire community, of which the museum becomes a part. One area where this influence is at play is the ordering of chaotic knowledge environments with the tools of an orderly environment of institutions. Another is

<sup>42</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2015, p. 200.

the co-creation of art and knowledge, such as in the case of the relational museum.<sup>43</sup> When, on the other hand, the primary recipient is characterised as being a professional, the entire model changes. The connoisseur and the critic belong to the museum. Outside the institution, within this model, the knowledge environment is not a chaotic or disordered yet changeable knowledge environment, but rather a profanum space which people enter in order to interact with art and thus affirm their own identity. They do not assume that everything around them should be changed, and the museum can be an ally. Rather, they see the museum as an island. The exhibition, in this sense, protects a specific and distinct community of people and objects (this carries class implications). From this standpoint, the priority of the institution's activities is not the transmission of knowledge understood as transformation of audience and culture, but rather knowledge as a form of preservation, ensuring its continuity. The initiative by educator–curators to open the exhibition to all audiences reveals the tension described here and shows how it allowed the museum's activities to span the gap between protecting itself from the world and changing that world.

## Summary

At the outset, I asked whether and how the realisation of a particular exhibition has enabled shifts in complex, museum-based knowledge environments, changing the understanding of what is produced, protected and transmitted knowledge. I treated the meta-thematic temporary exhibition *The Power of the Museum* as a laboratory of change. I analysed the responses it evokes from the museum community and visitors.

I have come to the conclusion aspects that are often treated as separate and opposing visions of the museum, knowledge, audiences, exhibitions and objects are in fact part of a single environment that is self-updating and responsive to internal and external changes. These reactions are based on two underlying ways of positioning the museum versus broader knowledge environments. The first one is based on organising exhibition activities as a form of enriching the structural diversity of the environment and overcoming the “entropy of structural automatism”.<sup>44</sup> The second is based on the desire to organise and discuss the exhibition as a self-model of the museum, which is a form that organises the institution and the world, bringing order and removing contradictions.

The exhibition, within the epistemic frame described here, is treated as a sign convention, an expression of care for the permanence of the texts that make up a given knowledge tradition and the permanence of its code. The museum as it stands now takes care of these two levels of knowledge organisation. This is made possible by the museum model, which considers objects as autonomous forms, separate from the world, to be introduced into various socio-cultural circuits, paying particular attention to the fact that form shapes meanings which in turn affect reality itself. That is why the self-updating of the museum's knowledge environment must allow both changing the codes and modelling the meaning of objects. *The Power of the Museum* triggered self-regulatory mechanisms at these two levels. We recognise that these are the mechanisms that maintain the sustainability and identity of the changing environment of knowledge and the traditions distinguished here, despite the following changes in thinking about the museum and the transformation of the museum experience. The dynamic updating

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<sup>43</sup> BYSZEWSKI, Janusz, PARCZEWSKA, Maria. *Muzeum...*

<sup>44</sup> ŁOTMAN, Jurij, USPIEŃSKI, Borys. O semiotycznym mechanizmie...

and reorganisation of the field here goes hand in hand with the refreshing of the knowledge automodel.

So it emerges that a temporary exhibition as a laboratory of change need not be considered only in terms of the audience, the museum's mission or the institution's goals. *The Power of the Museum* was, first and foremost, part of the history of museum knowledge circles organised around the idea of temple and forum, self-modelling and implementing models of change. Such environments allow knowledge to remain sustainable while the world and the epistemic framework that organises it undergo constant change.

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