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# PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC IN POLISH MUSEUMS

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, museums of different types, following the achievements of New Museology have been on a large scale ‘opening up’ to the public. In strategies, programme activities, and promotion campaigns it is the open character of the institution that is emphasized. In museum praxis and museological literature the word participation has been appearing increasingly more often. The public are encouraged to co-create or consult museum programmes. They are invited to visit museum zones not long ago accessible exclusively to museum staff. Never before in museums’ history has the position of the public been as prominent. Next to the museum collection the public have become the purpose of the institution’s operations. This emphasis shift can be defined as a true revolution: in museological literature Peter Van Mensch used the term of so-called second and third museum revolution.<sup>1</sup> The key concepts that museums apply more and more frequently and which are widely present in museological literature are participation, public involvement, social inclusion. Museums are analysed in the categories of social impact and social change. The fashion for museum participation that has become dominant over the last dozen of years requires a critical analysis.

The paper has been planned as a cross-sectional overview of participatory programmes in Polish museums. They will be categorized and characterized, placed within the philosophy of museum operations, and preliminary conclusions resulting from the implementation of such projects will be formulated.

The thematical content of the paper is connected with my research project *Participation and Postmuseum*. The thesis I formulate in it is that although change in the context of the implemented participatory projects is visible in museums, and an increasing number of museums have been following the concepts contained in the new proposed museum

definition discussed at the ICOM General Conference in Kyoto, participation is often but illusory and superficial, thus (except for single cases), fundamental change has not been really occurring. In the paper I will try to answer the question how programmes, participatory in their character, affect change in museums themselves. I will use the material collected in the *Atlas of Museum Participation* created with the grant of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in 2020, and meant to be continued in subsequent years.

## Understanding of the term ‘participation’

The concept of the participatory museum appeared for the first time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the course of the career and theoretical thought of John Cotton Dana<sup>2</sup>, long-standing director of the Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey, (1902–1929) and Newark Museum (1909–1929). Later on the ‘ladder of citizen participation’ formulated by Sherry R. Arnstein<sup>3</sup> was adapted to museum practice, yet it was only owing to Nina Simon, her blog and book,<sup>4</sup> in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, that the concept of museum participation became widely popular. Simon created a new pragmatic systematics of participatory practices in relation to the degree of the involvement on part of the public and museum staff, defining four models of social participation: contribution, collaboration, co-creation, and hosting, differing in the degree and scope of involvement.

The understanding of participation by museum staff: on the one hand directors marking out the directions of the museum operations and authors of participatory projects on the other, may differ. Many individuals refer to Simon, that is why in my research I followed her definition of the participatory museum, however, in many a case the understanding of participation is intuitional, not really referring to the theory; it can also be very broad, e.g., participation



1. Preparations for the 'Anything Goes' Museum' Exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw, 2016

can be identified with presence (namely every visiting an exhibition or taking part in a museum class is participation), which I reject on the grounds of my research.

### Categorization and characteristics of participatory projects

The afore-mentioned *Atlas of Museum Participation* was created in order to collect knowledge of participatory projects and programmes implemented by Polish museums. I have classified them into the following categories: exhibition, guided tour, volunteering, council/club, archive, collection, philosophy, and project, with the latter category covering all the non-standard actions which do not fit in the remaining lists.

The greatest impact is exercised by exhibitions, this owing to their relatively long duration and wide accessibility to individuals from outside the group of project participants. Work on an exhibition is usually of a long-term character and encompasses not just working out the curator concept, but also e.g. work on the layout, preparation of papers for the catalogue, or even creation of artistic interventions. These projects differ in the degree of participant involvement and freedom zone within which they can move. Action participants gain the curator status, although their task generally does not go beyond filling in the frames created by the project authors with content.

The 'Anything Goes' Museum Exhibition mounted at the National Museum in Warsaw (2015–2016) has been the largest project of this type implemented in a Polish museum. It was created with the participation of 69 children's curators who, divided into six groups, guided by tutors, worked on preparing a display with the Museum collection. Young curators selected objects from the Museum storage, thought out the theme and narration,

worked on the layout, catalogue, recorded material for audio-guides, gave interviews, and guided visitors. The scope of their freedom was large: *we were trying to follow them*, says Bożena Pysiewicz<sup>5</sup> who co-coordinated the Project, however, the style of tutors' work to a large degree was also reflected in the final shape of the Exhibition.

A similar concept of working with curators selected from among the public served as the basis for the 'How Do You See It?' Project and Exhibition at the Herbst Palace Museum in Lodz (2018–2019). The difference being that the curators did not choose works for the display: these had been selected by the public in a poll, so the curators' task was to build up narration around them, placing them within exhibition rooms, and labelling them. The Exhibition was prepared by a team of ten curators supervised by Museum coordinators. The curators strictly followed the Project script, while their scope of freedom was limited to definite factual decisions related to the Exhibition narration.

A long-term curator and artistic work were combined in the 'Earth Given(Up)' Exhibition Project (2020–2021) at the Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz. Children and teenagers were invited to create their own exhibition on the topic they chose, assuming the roles of curators and artists. The participants enjoyed quite a scope of freedom in thinking out the Exhibition's concept. Magdalena Goner, Project's originator, recalls in the context of applying for a grant for the Project that *in Ministry's grant competition it is requested to provide a detailed description of the project, however, I personally didn't want to decide what the exhibition would be, and certainly not what its title would be. We wanted the children to come up with this. What I wrote in the application had to be later updated, because when the kids came to the Museum they decided that they wanted something completely different.*<sup>6</sup>



2. 'How Do You See It?' Exhibition at the Herbst Palace Museum in Lodz, 2018; on the left, a stand for visitors to write down their comments



3. Works on the 'Subjugated Land' Exhibition at the Central Museum of the Textile Industry in Lodz, 2020



4. Gallery walls filling up during the 'ms3 Re:akcja' Exhibition at the Museum of Art in Lodz, 2009



5. Cooking workshops crowning the #veganpoems action inspired by Jimmie Durham's 'God's Children, God's Poems' Exhibition implemented by youth club members, 2018



6. Donors' meeting to celebrate the first year of the Podgórze Museum, 2019

From among all the participatory projects the 'ms3 Re:action' Exhibition mounted at the Museum of Art in Lodz (2009) was of the most democratic character. In its assumption, the anti-exhibition established a dialogue with the tradition of mounting exhibitions and the role of the public in a museum. The Project was an invitation to act, and the action, depending on the participants' choice, could be either incidental or long-term. The Museum opened to visitors an empty room dedicated to temporary exhibitions where items and tools for creative work were available; they also provided an option of using one's own materials. For the period of three months the Museum became the stage proper to public spaces, in which the only restrictions were those related to safety. The Exhibition was created in an organic way, without any interventions of the Museum staff.

Co-creating an exhibition can consist in creating its elements. Such was the case in the 'MOVERS' Exhibition at Warsaw's Asia and Pacific Museum (2019–2020). The participants: students of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, cooperated with the Museum for a year, beginning with visiting its storage spaces and discourse meetings up to creating their own artistic work which either corresponded with a chosen collection item: an object which actually had moved the person, or using their work they wanted to move (in the sense of activating, re-interpreting) the collection.

A long-term character, even longer than work on an exhibition, can be found in activities undertaken in volunteering or a membership in a museum council or club, although when compared to Anglo-Saxon countries, the number of the latter is small in Polish museums. The most extensive volunteering programmes can be found at the largest museums: the National Museum in Warsaw, the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów, and the Warsaw's POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. There volunteers

implement their own projects, have a coordinator; they can also involve in the museum's current operations. Club activity has developed most strongly at the Museum of Art in Lodz where there is an ms17 club for teenagers and the ms club for adults. Members of the first meet once a week and work together on chosen projects (one major project yearly; they also engage in the Museum's current work). The Club's formula is broad and open to proposals from the young people, although, as Agnieszka Wojciechowska-Sej who runs the Club admits, there is a need for *the teenagers' creativity to be provoked*.<sup>7</sup>

For six years there operated a meeting platform for teenagers from secondary schools at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2013–2019); called 'Enter the Museum!', it combined a circle of interest, with a club, and a volunteer programme. It provided space allowing to become acquainted with a museum institution, to become involved in projects, and to undertake one's own activities. Katarzyna Witt, author of the concept and Project's coordinator, recalls: *I was open to all their ideas (...) with each new edition I could better understand that the participants had to be given an even more active role, and co-create the Programme. Instead of us conveying knowledge, we were generating it together, this resulting from being together, from the meeting of different people*.<sup>8</sup>

### Participatory projects in the philosophy of museums' operations

The number and scale of participatory projects show what position this formula has in the philosophy of museums' operations. The idea of working together, co-deciding on the programme, co-creating the collection, is particularly close to some museums; for the sake of commonality, they give

up their authoritarian position of knowledge conveyors. The participatory philosophy serves as the grounds for the work of many 'in-field' museums for whom cooperation with the local community is not so much a necessity, as a natural attitude and approach to work. The very definition of participation for the activities undertaken by these museums is secondary, while their staff do not really use the term. Martyna Satek, running the Sea Fishing Museum in Niechorze, speaks of a sort of neighbourly relations: *We do not only play the role of a museum, but also to a great degree of a kind of a community centre which brings together NGOs and various informal groups. Off-season, quite a lot of people do not work, and culture is in great demand. We provide the venue for them to meet and integrate (...) Many groups and organizations meet in our rooms, have their offices there.*<sup>9</sup>

New museums, when awaiting their permanent exhibitions, attempt at taking root in the local community. In this respect urban museums benefit as if twice, since establishing a relationship is often connected with amassing objects and stories for the collection. Established in 2018, the Museum of the City of Malbork (MMM, under organisation) has from the very beginning attempted at establishing their relations with the residents, trying to overcome the challenging history of the city in which, following WW II, almost all the city was resettled with newcomers. Dorota Raczkowska, Director, emphasizes: *we want to teach people that they can come to MMM at any time, talk, learn how to archive family mementoes and trust us sufficiently to believe that if they pass them onto us,*

*these will not disappear here (...). Such a process needs to gain momentum. We know that if one lady brings something here, shortly her neighbour will, too. I believe that the first ten years will have to pass before we win the trust of the people who have come here from different places, and still do not fully treat Malbork as their home.*<sup>10</sup>

The participation idea can sometimes motivate establishing a museum. This is exactly what happened in Cracow: energy concentrated around a tiny Podgórze History House run by the district cultural centre, over ten years climaxed with the launch of the Podgórze Museum as a branch of the big Museum of Cracow. Melania Tutak who ran the Podgórze History House remembers its beginnings: *I did not organize collections of objects then, (...) with time, when the items began to flow in, it turned out that they could serve to create a kind of a permanent exhibition. And later, when someone came and saw that display, they would soon first bring the items they had at home, and later objects they would buy (...). Around the Podgórze History House there appeared people affiliated to the cultural centre and the association [PODGORZE.PL]; they would come and go, and share their stories, recollections, so a need arose to somehow systemize it all.*<sup>11</sup> Once the Museum had opened, maintaining that energy and relations with the local community proved challenging: museum-related restrictions connected with e.g., security procedures, the necessity to plan events with much anticipation, or red tape, curb the potential for swift reactions and action flexibility.



7. Building of a housing estate close behind the site of the Silesian Museum in Katowice, November 2020

A



B



8. (A-B). 'My Courtyard Museum' Project implemented in Gniezno by the Museum of the First Piasts at Lednica, 2014; (A) Digging up the treadmill with children, co-authors of the exhibition; (B) The treadmill displayed

(Photos: 1 – P. Grochowalski; 2 – P. Tomczyk, Archives of the Ministry of Justice in Łódź; 3 – HaWa; 4 – M. Stępień, Archives of the Ministry of Justice in Łódź; 5 – A. Wojciechowska-Sej; 6, 7 – K. Jagodzińska; 8 (A-B) – Archives of the Museum of the First Piasts in Lednica)

## Change in museums

Participatory operations point to the direction of changes occurring in contemporary museums; attempts have been made to make them reflect in the new museum definition to be authorized by ICOM. The draft definition from 2019 contained many key words which do not appear in the currently valid one: *Museums are democratizing inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures (...). They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities (...).*<sup>12</sup> Although the definition was not approved through the vote<sup>13</sup> and works on its new phrasing are continued, the unrest it stirred up among the museum-related circles and the support for this direction of thinking about museums expressed by many museum specialists and museum curators demonstrates how deeply museum philosophy has been changing. *Museology has come full circle*, writes Dorota Folga-Januszewska, *after almost two thousand years of museums existing as venues for meetings and intellectual inspiration, after two centuries of acting for 'citizens', the institutions are once again seeking individual people among their public.*<sup>14</sup>

More and more boldly do museums surpass borders delineated by the questions related to the amassed collections, tackling relevant contemporary topics, e.g., environmental questions, multiculturalism, migrations, urban space. They operate in discourse and display programmes, but are also launching activism in the sphere of broadly-conceived social responsibility, e.g., for spatial change in museums' vicinity, encouraged to do so by the 2016 ICOM Resolution titled *The Responsibility of Museums towards Landscape*.<sup>15</sup> Acting in harmony with the spirit of the Resolution, the Silesian Museum in Katowice showed determination when opposing the developer operating on the land neighbouring on the Museum complex (2018–2019); the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw started building partnership with institutions and entities grouped around the Defilad Square (2017–2019) at which currently the construction of the Museum's seat is underway; while the Podgórze Museum, in cooperation with the associations operating in the District, started lobbying to have a park created next to the Museum (from 2018).<sup>16</sup> These are examples of museum activism<sup>17</sup> in which participation direction is reversed: then museums, together with the community or definite stakeholders, begin to co-create space around them.

The overview of participatory projects in Polish museums allow to draw initial conclusions with respect to the question posed at the beginning of the paper: how do participatory programmes alter the very museums? Just listening to the voices of the individuals involved in the implementation of participatory projects we realise what kind of a change has occurred on the personal level. Let me quote two reflections here.

Mariola Olejniczak, originator of the 'Museum of My Courtyard' Project, implemented in Gniezno by the Museum of the First Piasts at Lednica, says: *I have changed my perspective. Thanks to this action I know that it is worthwhile asking the public, listening carefully to what they have to say, instead of treating yourself as a person who knows better.*<sup>18</sup>

Bożena Pysiewicz comments on the lesson that can be learnt from the 'Anything Goes' Museum Exhibition: *I have a feeling that a shift in thinking has taken place. Participation begins to be a permanent tool for acting within various museum teams (...). Participation may be a tool serving to listen to the public, to encourage them to act, for them not to be merely participants, but also initiators of museum actions. I believe that we are on the way to accepting the fact that state or local-government institutions are the property of the public. Our role is to convince the public that these belong to them. Many of the staff are already aware of it, the next stage will be to encourage the public to act.*<sup>19</sup>

Work of a participatory character benefits both project participants and the museums, however, this formula, despite an increasing awareness and fondness for it among museum management, is more marginal than widely-spread. In the first edition of the *Atlas of Museum Participation* for which material was collected in 2020, I entered records of 50 projects from 32 museums. The list of such projects in Polish museums is not complete, yet it certainly covers the majority of them, which clearly shows that in Polish museums such projects are scarce. It is often the case that enthusiasm for such a working formula is spread by individuals directly involved in implementing them, having been given approval by the people they report to, and not *vice versa*: it is not the bosses who motivate to follow it. Although the latter observation cannot be regarded as an overall rule, e.g., the participatory philosophy forms grounds for the activity of the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow, while the 'Anything Goes' Museum was conceived by the Director of the National Museum in Warsaw at the time Agnieszka Morawińska. The majority of implemented projects are just one-off projects, this showing that museums treat them as a sort of a test: verifying how this formula allows to work. What is more, usually small-scale projects, they are in their museums' programmes but of marginal prominence.

The experience of implementing participatory programmes changes first of all definite individuals working for museums, not necessarily the institutions as such. After all, museums are people. Nevertheless, when these individuals leave the museum they worked for, their expertise, experience, and enthusiasm for this work formula often leave with them.

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**Abstract:** In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, participation is one of the key words related to the operations of museums and debate around them. The public are encouraged to co-create museum projects: exhibitions, programmes that accompany exhibitions, studies; they play the role of consultants and advisors (youth councils, clubs, consultancy teams). Museums are more and more widely 'opening' to embrace the public.

Never before has the position of visitors been as significant.

An overview of participatory programmes in Polish museums is provided. They are classified and characterized by the Author who places them within the philosophy of museum operations, particularly with respect to the altering role of museums, currently debated over within ICOM, with the context of the new museum definition in mind; furthermore,

she presents the initial conclusions drawn from the implementation of such projects for museums.

In the paper the material from interviews conducted

as part of the *Atlas of Museum Participation* Project implemented with a grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage has been used.

**Keywords:** participation, International Council of Museums (ICOM), museum activism, museum definition.

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## Endnotes

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