Giulia Cordin

In Search of New Structures

Negotiating Design Practices Towards a Participatory Museum

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Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Amalia Barboza, Prof. Dr. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, Prof. Eva Leitolf
University of Art and Design Linz, Linz, Austria
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To my family and my almost wife,
my lucky encounters

The new definition of museums, approved by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in August 2022, makes audience participation the center of the institutional mandate. Participation is seen as the ideal means to reconnect with audiences and address the criticisms of exclusion, irrelevance, and elitism directed at contemporary museums. However, the generic use of the term to describe a wide variety of experiences has emptied up its meaning, as analyzed by several scholars in recent years (Miessen 2010; Mörsch 2011; Sternfeld 2018). Their critical argument relates to an understanding of participation and democracy as based on harmonious and unanimous consensus (Mouffe 2000, Ranciére 2004).

This thesis is grounded in an agonistic understanding of participation and seeks to engage audiences in dialogue in a way that has an impact on the institutional structure. Through conversations with professionals, namely scholars, curators, and museum staff, I've mapped existing practical approaches to participation. The thesis also introduces a practice-based research project in collaboration with Museion, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bolzano, which established specific collaborations between stakeholders, the public, and museum staff by re-defining the museum's public events. The case study explores possible new institutional structures for participatory engagement.

Central to my argument is the role of design in institutional transformation. The research of this thesis argues for an organizational transformation of the museum guided by design inquiry, challenging implicit premises, and relying on participatory and collaborative practices. While the traditional understanding of design is typically solution-oriented and does not often question the underlying premises of the practice being considered, drawing on Junginger (2015), I reconfigure design as primarily an organizational activity rather than merely a supplementary service. Redefining the design-discipline within a broader theoretical framework establishes an interdisciplinarity that prioritizes socio-political access to every project.

Abstract

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> Museums must either become participative or disappear. (Bernfeld 1993, 52)

> Knowledge is no longer unified and monolithic; it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective—rather a cacophany of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values. The voice of the museum is one among many. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 152)

Research Background

Nearly fifteen years ago, US museum director Nina Simon foresaw that "the majority of museums will integrate participatory experiences" into their activities in the next twenty years (2010, 6). Simon identified participation as an ideal solution to reconnect with audiences and address criticisms of exclusion, irrelevance, and elitism directed at cultural institutions in previous decades. Her focus was particularly on the development behind these experiences, defining participation primarily as a *design issue* (2010, 1).

Significantly, participation became a key theme across various disciplines and sectors of society since the turn of the millennium—the 2010s were retrospectively labeled the "Decade of Participation" (Klatt 2012, 3)—and publications on the topic have rapidly multiplied in recent years. Primarily consisting of essays or practical manuals, these contributions aim to share experiences and practical advice to engage audiences actively in museums. The majority of these texts originate from the field of museum art education, highlighting an understanding of participation primarily as an educational measure rather than a procedural method to be structurally implemented. Simon herself refers to participatory experiences "as one of many types of experiences available to visitors" (2010, 6).

The concept of participation, widely embraced and implemented across numerous institutions over the past decade, the term has undergone critical scrutiny revealing its limitations (McCarthy and Wright 2015; Miessen 2010). Often, its ubiquitous application, indiscriminately attributed to a wide array of activities, has devalued the concept of its meaning and value, without, however, delivering adequate, critical examination. Jeremy Till observes how "participation

too often becomes an expedient method of placation rather than a real process of transformation" (2006). Similarly, Markus Miessen describes participation as a "Regime of Harmonistan" (2010), when it occurs in a predetermined context that also implies an understanding of democracy as harmonious agreement. This misunderstanding arises from an erroneous interpretation that assumes democratic participation relies on an unanimous and perpetual consensus (Mouffe 2000, Rancière 2004).

Today museums are increasingly committed to participatory practices, but the initiatives offered under this banner presuppose consensus among the involved parties and cover up existing power relations. The dilemma of participation implies a closed system in which the available options for choice, and those presenting them, cannot be challenged. Referring to participation in social media, Geert Lovink speaks of "sadness by design" (2019), to describe contributions within predefined parameters (see also Stalder 2018). In a similar way, audiences in museums, invited to participate, lack the opportunity to negotiate the contents and formats presented to them. In many museums, participation is more of a rhetorical commitment than a catalyst for real change as participants' contributions are often channeled into activities with predetermined outcomes (Baur 2008; Groten 2019; Hüther 2010; McCarthy and Wright 2015). These scaffolded experiences only aim at quantifiable results to measure audience attendance. This type of participation fails to find resonance within the museum, neither through tangible material nor through contributions in an open discourse. Participation, in this way, tends to reinforce the museum's position as the sole authority of knowledge.

The positive connotation surrounding the discussion on participation often hinders a critical and substantive inquiry into the authenticity of its intentions. But is it possible to challenge and revise the underlying assumptions of a widely accepted interpretation of participation? How to redefine the concept to effect real change within museums? And what role can designers play to identify and support alternative scenarios?

Design plays a central role in the practical development of participatory activities in museums. Literature reveals a wealth of resources—articles, websites, and symposia—and a visit to a museum highlights a multitude of solutions that might be deployed. These resources offer a wide spectrum of approaches, perspectives, and tools, providing applied insights to designers on the subject. There is, however, a lack of critical inquiry into the underlying objectives. Designers' contributions often adhere to a predominantly solution-oriented paradigm, relegating them to marginal roles within participatory frameworks (Sangiorgi and Junginger 2009). They operate within already predetermined contexts, exerting minimal influence on the processes they partake in, and are, as a result, "kept away from questioning underlying assumptions, values, norms, and beliefs. They are hired and used to express existing values and norms through new service offerings rather than to inquire into the organizational system and its culture, both of which have a strong influence on the ways services can be delivered and provided" (ibid., 3). In this way, designers do not impact existing processes.

In recent years, however, the mandate of design has been redefined through an ongoing expansion, driven by its intersections with diverse disciplinary domains and emerging perspectives. These dynamics led to a broader and more inclusive definition. This different perspective often encounters challenges in being recognized and integrated into design practices, both by clients and by designers themselves (Norman 2010).

For the purpose of this research, I envisage design as a practice which seeks to produce new premises to understand and critically act on existing conditions. My research specifically explores how design can contribute to foster a different form of participation in museums. By referring to various critical arguments and practical experiences, I introduce a design-oriented approach that aims to identify structures, methods, and processes capable of integrating new visions for public engagement. The thesis aims to reassess the assumptions surrounding museum participation, in order to allow a transformative process for the institution itself. Participation then transcends the mere interaction among participants to encompass the redistribution of power characterizing the institution in general (Mayrberger 2013). In this context, participation is conceptualized as an open-ended process, involving negotiation among the parties to establish spaces for long-term dialogue and interaction. It ideally embodies an unpredictable form of (inter-)action, akin to an ongoing research endeavor. This approach involves a diverse range of actions, with the contribution of all participants leading to tangible and enduring results.

Methodology

The analysis of the concept of participation also led me to question my role as a designer. During the years I worked on this PhD, not only has its topic changed but I have also deeply interrogated and revised my own practice. My approach entails practice-based research, with design taking center stage and becoming the primary method of

constructing knowledge. Implicit in the concept of "research through design" (Koskinen et al. 2011) is the idea that critical inquiry does not operate retrospectively as an intellectual and theoretical activity but is instead practiced through the design process itself.[1] Knowing and doing are intricately intertwined, constantly informing one another.

At the beginning, the analysis of the literature review has revealed a significant and enduring mismatch between practice and theory in the museum field. Academic discussion often surpasses the actual changes introduced in reality documented in a missing relevance of discourse in the daily practice of museums (Murphy 2018). This underscores the need of greater synergies in the field in order to facilitate dialogue and the exchange of knowledge.

At the same time, while most publications aim to offer specialized insights, critical literature on participation from a practical perspective is rare. To foster an interdisciplinary dialogue and enhance the understanding of the potential contributions of designers, I have drawn upon a diverse range of literature. Specifically, I have introduced reflections from other disciplinary fields, aimed at mobilizing a critical interpretation of the concept of participation in museums. The work of scholars such as Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, Nora Sternfeld, Bernadette Lynch, and Carmen Mörsch, to name a few, has allowed me to investigate the transformative potential inherent in the concept of participation.

Concurrently, I have initiated the mapping of a multitude of experiences that are involved in catalyzing a redefined participatory practice with their audiences. Over the course of this PhD research, I visited and discussed the activities of multiple institutions and their specific approaches. I have engaged in conversations with museum professionals from both the professional sphere—directors, curators, public program experts, researchers, designers—and the academic sphere. Through the report of their experiences, I explored and traced the ongoing changes to the three traditional pillars of the museum mandate—exhibition, collection, and public program—highlighting how these areas are mobilized and reimagined.

My primary focus was on medium- to small-sized institutions which work in fields such as architecture, design, contemporary art, and e-culture. I excluded other types of museums, as I believed

1 "This is a whole genre of practice concerned with the place and role of design, a movement away from the idea that criticisms or critical positions of design could only be made from the outside – by design historians or theorists – but could actually be mounted from within practice and by practitioners. Designers have a voice, they had an agency, and their practice could be a platform for speaking about theoretical concepts and for acting in ideological terms" (Mazé 2009, 387).

they have already devised at least temporary strategies for engaging with their audiences. Ethnographic museums, for instance, have long collaborated directly with their respective communities, while science museums mainly favor a hands-on and technological approach to participation. As my research also included a possible change of institutional structure, I also avoided working with larger institutions, due to the inherent challenges in influencing their operational processes and dynamics. The selected institutions were predominantly located in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. This decision was motivated by the intention to juxtapose contexts characterized by diverse social backgrounds and museum traditions. These encounters are documented in the appendix of this thesis. Within the chapters, I will quote some passages from these conversations to support my argument. These quotes will be referenced as follows (Appendix: name, page). Furthermore, a curated selection of these experiences serves as foundational material for an in-depth analysis of best practices.

The conversations are complemented by a participatory observation experience. Since September 2021 and for the subsequent two and a half years, I have been collaborating with Museion, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bolzano, significantly, having taken an active role as a member of its Art Club. The Art Club project represents the institution's attempt to enable the negotiation of competences, inviting representatives from its audiences to form an independent working group tasked with curating its public program in collaboration with the museum team.

My involvement provided an opportunity to test my hypotheses and to observe them in practice. I documented every phase of the project's implementation and development and evaluated them critically. The data come from both my own experience and from semi-structured interviews conducted with all project participants. The unveiling in early spring 2024 of a reconceived and renegotiated structure, aimed at fostering interaction between audiences and the museum, constitutes a practical contribution to a rethought experience of public participation in cultural institutions.

Accompanying the development and reflections of this thesis is a CGI animation, integrated as video stills in this volume. It can be viewed in its entirety at this link: https://shorturl.at/npqAV (additionally, there is a QR code to access it on page 351). The animation *Morphosis* took shape concurrently with the research work, but it does not serve as a visual aid to support the analysis processes, nor does it seek to provide evidence in support of the presented theses. The animation is intended as a thought-provoking tool for discussion, stimulating

critical reflection and new perspectives, and, hereby, contributing to the ongoing discourse on participation in museums.
For this purpose, a speculative approach has been adopted, which hints at an alternative open future scenario. The critical dimension of this approach lies in the subversion of hegemonic representations, offering users access and space for reflection on their meanings, and, ultimately, on the image of reality they produce. According to design scholar Carl DiSalvo, "design stands in contrast to disciplines or practices that produce descriptions or explanations alone. Design attempts to produce new conditions of the tools by which to understand and act on current conditions" (2012a, 16). He adds: "One of the distinctive and challenging aspects of speculative interventions as a mode of inquiry is that although they are done *through* design, they are not necessarily done *for* design. (...) the value of speculative interventions is the ways they make manifest contemporary conditions and articulate issues" (DiSalvo 2014, 1).

While originating from this specific research, the animation is not limited to one particular reception context. This aspect enables the screening of the video in diverse institutions and discussion venues, such as talks, symposia, and workshops, to initiate broad inquiries into museum participation.

Thesis Structure

The research, the materials, and knowledge collated in this publication do not solely stem from theoretical investigations; rather, they represent an attempt to produce knowledge through practice and vice versa. In this sense, practical action and critical reflection alternate and inform each other throughout the book.

The first chapter contextualizes the museums' approach to participation taking into account the revisions already underway in these institutions. Participation is also interpreted with reference to a post-democratic approach (Crouch 2004; Fisher 2009; Mouffe 2000; Rancière 2004; Stalder 2018; Žižek 1989) which redefines the public agenda in a new way.

Referencing museology, philosophy, and politics, the objectives of the participatory museum activities are redefined. The transformative potential inherent in the concept of participation, when a consensual understanding of participation is overcome, is outlined by introducing a critical perspective towards power relations and the social role played by museums today. The discussion is grounded on postcolonial, poststructuralist, and post-Marxist discourses, whose impact on museum studies is strong. Contemporary thinkers and scholars such as Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Nora Sternfeld examine participation by highlighting the conflicts inherent in practice. This critique includes the public representation and possible inclusions within museums, questioning its social mandate. Changes in museums over the past decades have mainly altered the public appearance, collection, programming, or curatorial positions (Tanga 2021).
A systemic change would, however, concern the internal structures, mechanisms, and processes in order to deeply understand and revise the very way they operate and function (Jung and Love 2017).

The second chapter refers these theses to the practices of four museums that have implemented participation in recent years. These institutions are the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, the Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI), and the Kunstinstituut Melly, both based in Rotterdam, in The Netherlands. The selection of these institutions was determined by their radical approach to challenging traditional ways of exhibiting, collecting, and curating a public program in favor of engaging with the public and creating an affiliated community in dialogue with the museum. Their disciplinary focus ranges from design to art to architecture. The processes and formats activated by these institutions do not merely serve as a reference model within their specific disciplinary fields, but they potentially extend to the museum community at large. I also highlighted the collaboration of these institutions with designers in developing, discussing, and shaping their participatory activities. Designers are not employed by the institution but operate as external consultants; nevertheless, these museums have embedded extensive and/or critical design practices.

Building on the insights of these experiences, the third chapter outlines a proposal to recontextualize the role of design in museums in respect to participatory practices. Drawing upon the perspectives of scholars such as Richard Buchanan, Sabine Junginger, and Carl DiSalvo, among others, this chapter introduces and discusses lines of thought converging on a different vision of the role and mandate of design today. In this reconfiguration, methodologies and projects move beyond the assumptions of a purely functional understanding of discipline to embrace an adversarial and speculative approach (DiSalvo 2012, and 2014; Dunne and Raby 2013). Design is redefined as a cultural practice deeply influenced by social, political, economic, and ideological conditions. From this point of view, design turns into a critical activity, a form of inquiry (Buchanan 1992).
It becomes a tool for investigation to generate knowledge beyond the conventional boundaries of the discipline, initiating change.

The final chapter describes and analyzes a practice-led and practice-based case study developed in collaboration with Museion, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bolzano (South Tyrol, Italy). In September 2021, the museum launched the first edition of the 'Art Club' program, a platform for participatory programming of its public events. The decision to create Art Club was significant regarding the underlying questions of this research. For this reason, I participated in the project, observing its processes in a participatory manner for over two and a half years. On one hand, the Art Club experience enabled a comparison with the best practices presented in Chapter 2, comparing methodologies, formats, and objectives. At the same time, the case study allowed for a practical exploration, an *internal* experience concerning the research questions. The two-year involvement made it possible to assess the short- to medium-term impact of the processes in the organization. The chapter thoroughly examines all phases of the project from its initial launch to its redefinition.

Chapter 1
THE PITFALLS OF PARTICIPATION

Introduction

In recent decades, contemporary museums have been engaged in complex transformation processes, fueled by numerous theoretical shifts over the past fifty years, each unsettling the museums' core principles. This crisis continues to unfold today against a backdrop of a limited understanding of the role of museums in contemporary society. One critical argument regarding the contemporary museum is aimed at the missing approach to audience engagement.

Alongside numerous other scholars, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) emphasized participation as a fundamental method for reestablishing connections with audiences and addressing long-standing criticisms of exclusion, irrelevance, and elitism. The collaborative engagement with the public marks a significant departure from traditional museum practices, challenging the conventional perception of museums as authoritative institutions and visitors as passive recipients of knowledge (Falk and Dierking 2013, 308). Nevertheless, the overuse of the term *participation* to encompass a wide array of experiences, often applying the concept without adhering to its foundational principles and values, has led to a possible loss of its significance.

In this chapter, I untertake to reconceptualize the core assumptions that underpin discussions surrounding museum participation. This reframing begins with the acknowledgment that such discussions must be situated within the broader social and political context of post-democracy. By drawing upon the insights of scholars including Jacques Rancière (1995, 2004, 2008), Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2007, 2008), Nora Sternfeld (2018, 2011), Bernadette Lynch (2011), and Carmen Mörsch (2011), among others, I critically examine the transformative potential inherent in the concept of participation. This examination transcends its formal representation and moves beyond the contemporary inclination towards sustaining an illusory harmonious consensus.

The influence of postcolonial, poststructuralist, and post-Marxist discourses provides a critical framework through which to analyze power dynamics and the contemporary societal functions of museum institutions. Drawing upon the sociological and philosophical foundations laid by Foucault and Gramsci, whose impact on museum studies is profound, I engage in a critical interrogation of participation. This raises fundamental questions concerning processes of representation, inclusion and exclusion, transformation, and their

societal relevance. Central to the discourse is the observation that the operational mechanisms of museums often remain opaque to those outside the field (Gopnik 2007). The changes observed within museums in recent decades have primarily manifested in their public appearances, concerning the collection, events, and curatorial methods.

However, as underlined by Jung and Love, systemic change needs to come from within, deep inside the mechanisms of museums, down to the very way they operate and function (2017, 12). I align with their argument when I suggest here that a critique of the museum and a precise understanding of participation has to focus on the internal structures and processes that govern museums today.

1.1. *A Museum Crisis*

From September 1st to 7th, 2019, Tokyo hosted a gathering of over 4,500 experts from the international museum community, who convened to deliberate and vote on an updated, universally accepted definition of the term *museum*. The Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)[1] marked an unprecedented event. Unlike the previous revision in 2007, which had led to only marginal alterations to the text, the Assembly represented a significant departure, given that the definition had largely remained unchanged for nearly fifty years since the organization's foundation.[2] However, in the decade preceding the meeting, numerous museum national committees and representatives had advocated for a revision and discussion of the wording, citing its failure to align with "the language of the 21st century" (ICOM 2017). Specifically, critiques focus on the absence of post-colonial arguments, the transformative impact of digitization, and the consequences of a globalized world.

The Committee on Museum Definition, Prospects, and Potentials, established two years earlier in 2017 by the ICOM board, was entrusted with the task of soliciting proposals and drafting a new definition. The mandate presented a complex challenge, as it required

1 The International Council of Museums (ICOM), a non-governmental organization founded in 1946, aims to promote and develop the role of museums worldwide. Currently, it represents over 20,000 museums in 120 different countries. ICOM provides a shared ethical framework for museums and serves as a forum for professional discussions. Although the definition is not legally binding, it influences the allocation of grants in many countries.

2 1974: "A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment."

2007: "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment."

the formulation to be inclusive of every museum typology and to encompass the diverse needs and interpretations of a globally dispersed community from various continents.

Over the two years of its activity, the working group led by museologist Jette Sandahl collected 269 alternative proposals. These submissions, originating from both national committees and individual museum institutions, converged in the definition presented in Tokyo:

> Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing. (ICOM 2019a)

The proposed definition emphasized the multilayered and urgent challenges facing museums in contemporary society, taking a firm stance on their civic function and underscoring their inclusive and dialogic mission. Notably, it marked a significant departure from previous versions. Traditional museum activities, including collecting, research, and heritage interpretation, were maintained. Additionally, there was an emphasis on the diversity of audiences and their active participation. The new definition depicted the museum as a multilayered platform for critical dialogue and a contextualized understanding of reality. Of central importance was the repositioning of audiences, no longer seen as passive spectators but rather as active collaborators intricately involved in co-constructing meaning within their respective communities. Significant was the omission of the term *education*, signaling a radical departure from previous paradigms and redirecting the museum's focus towards audience engagement and empowerment. This shift opens up opportunities for the (re)negotiation of meanings and facilitates the integration of museum experiences into existing knowledge frameworks.

Despite the merit of this proposal, the ICOM General Assembly in Tokyo did not ratify it. This decision followed a long and controversial debate in the preceding months and received the support of 70.4%

of the voters.[3] The minutes of the meeting state: "Despite the indisputable qualities of the definition, the text is not 100% complete and will not be able to be satisfactorily completed on a set basis" (ICOM 2020). The contentious aspects of the definition primarily revolved around its political and ideological implications, which were deemed unsuitable for all cultural contexts represented and not fully reflective of the prevailing circumstances faced by the majority of institutions involved in the voting process. Consequently, the Assembly opted to defer the decision and establish a new working group to further deliberate on the matter.

The dissent voiced during the General Assembly proceedings mirrored the ongoing museum crisis. For decades, museums have been undergoing a phase of *existential revision*[4] (Kirchberg 2005, 166), a transition that should lead them from the traditional modernist conception towards a new form. The conceptual framework guiding this transition, articulated through various terminologies over time,[5] had not yet achieved consensus within the museum community (Samis and Michaelson 2016; Witcomb 2003).

The contemporary crisis confronting museums arises from a complex interplay of factors that have evolved and intersected rapidly since the mid-20th century. Transformations in socio-political, educational, postcolonial, and economic fields, coupled with the proliferation of new technological media, have profoundly reshaped Western society and, consequently, the role and functions of the museum (Fehr 2003, 40; Sternfeld 2018, 17). These challenges have compelled museums to continually reinvent themselves[6] in order to adapt to new contexts,

3 The definition had been previously accepted by the ICOM Executive Board two months earlier, on 22 July in Paris, for presentation to all members. However, on 12 August, twenty-four national sections requested a postponement of the vote in order to submit an alternative proposal. The note expressed "strong disagreement" with a proposal that constituted a "significant change" (ICOM 2019b).

4 "existenziellen Überprüfung" (Kirchberg 2005b, 166).

5 Scholars in museum studies and related fields have worked to outline the development of the post-modern museum through numerous definitions, frequently highlighting different aspects over time. These delineations frequently allude directly to the successive shifts that have transpired, including the digital, reflexive, educational, and participatory turns. Over the past twenty-five years alone, terms such as "post-museum" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000), "relational museum" (Macdonald 2010), "para-museum" (Sternfeld 2018), "transmedia museum" (Kidd 2014), "engaging museum" (Black 2005), "responsive museum" (Lang, Reeve and Wollard 2006), "participatory museum" (Simon 2010), "connected museum" (Drotner and Schrøder 2013), and "distributed museum" (Balsamo 2011; Stuedahl and Lowe 2015) have emerged to encapsulate various conceptualizations of museum practice and identity.

6 "From the museum's instantiation as a cultural body, its staffing has adapted as circumstances have required, responding to shifting museological functions: collection and preservation, education, and now entertainment. First came the curators to take care of the collections; then, as museums implemented teaching and public programs, they formed education departments; when they needed to manage and attract donors and funding, they instituted development departments; when they realized they could commodify the museum-going experience, they converted galleries into gift shops; when they went online, they expanded

rendering them simultaneously among the most conservative and disruptive institutions in contemporary society. However, a critical reflection was lacking regarding "a corresponding adaptation of the operation as a whole" (Tanga 2021).

Trapped in a "crippling contradiction between entrenched, hierarchical, and corporate-minded internal operations and civic-minded outward ambitions to support democratic ideals" (ibid., 3), the museum withstood the critiques, mostly articulated by academia and critical theory (Parry 2010). Nonetheless, these inquiries have destabilized its foundations, rendering it a contested space and provoking a "crisis of representation"[7] (Sternfeld 2018). An examination of the traditional role and the catalysts driving its transformation is, therefore, essential for understanding the enduring legacy of these processes in the contemporary museum field.[8]

1.2. *Historical Roots of the Current Crisis*

The public museum, which emerged in the eighteenth century—a model of European origin but exported worldwide—is framed as one of the emblematic institutions of the modern period (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). Established from the aftermath of the French Revolution, it assumed a dual educative and disciplinary role (Bennett 1988; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Sternfeld 2005). In contrast to earlier princely and royal collections, the public museum was conceptualized to serve a civic function within the nation-state, tasked with the mission of educating diverse segments of society. In the confluence of state and cultural ideologies during the nineteenth century, access to the arts for the working classes was perceived as integral to self-improvement and the cultivation of political citizenship (Lloyd and Thomas 1998). The museum emerged as "the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like the youth" (Cole 1853, as cited in Minihan 1977, 61). The epistemological messages disseminated

public relations departments to include social media specialists. In most cases, however, this staff growth occurred without much consideration for the entire structure: what people do, how they work, and how they relate to one another in their responsibilities. Departments have been added much like a building's physical expansions or extensions, an extra wing here and additional space there, without a corresponding adaptation of the operation as a whole" (Tanga 2021).

7 The "crisis of representation" in museums, as outlined by Nora Sternfeld, underscores the fundamental challenges that institutions face in their roles as narrators and custodians of culture. Sternfeld critiques the traditional unilateral approach adopted by museums in presenting history, art, and culture, which often reflects the perspectives and values of dominant cultural elites. This lack of diversity and inclusivity in museum narratives leads to a limited and distorted representation of cultural heritage.

8 "(...) museums have roots in, and still operate as, Enlightenment and colonial institutions that exercise authoritative knowledge, inscribing a Eurocentric culture founded on hierarchies of race, class, and gender. This is especially true of the hierarchical staff structure within museums' internal operations" (Tanga 2021).

by museums were deemed instrumental in promoting virtuous conduct and shaping model citizens. Consequently, museums were regarded "as enabling technologies (...), major apparatuses in the creation of national identities" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 25).

Hooper-Greenhill describes how governments used museums to confront their citizens with their culture, promoting a colonial and nationalist worldview. Carefully crafted visual representations—often using artifacts from colonies—were adopted to produce an encyclopedic and harmonious view of the country's history. Presented as indisputable truths, these narratives obscured their construction and the selective processes employed. The communication and learning theories that underpinned nineteenth-century museums portrayed the public as passive recipients. Knowledge was conceived as objective and information-driven, while museums primarily served as vehicles for top-down and authoritative communication.

Moreover, the modernist museum effectively served as a tool for the burgeoning European nation-states in overseeing and regulating the influx of new workers into rapidly developing urban centers. Centuries of institutional norms have molded the role and conduct of the spectator within hierarchical power relations. A visit to the museum entailed adhering to strict codes of conduct; individuals attended with the purpose of observing, and by observing others, they gleaned cues on appropriate behavior (Bennett 1988). During this era, the museum was identified "as the highest instruments of human cultivation" and thus simultaneously "the guarantee of public order" (Gladstone, as cited in Minihan 1977, 112). Drawing on Foucault, Bennett (1988) identifies the museum as one of the pivotal institutions of the control society. Every aspect of the museum—its architecture, the arrangement of exhibits, and visual communication strategies—contributed to shaping and guiding visitors' experiences through exhibition design.

> To see and be seen, to survey yet always be under surveillance, the object of an unknown but controlling look: in these ways (...) expositions realized some of the ideals of panopticism in transforming the crowd into a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating, and, (...) consistently orderly public – a society watching over itself. (...) The exhibitionary complex (...) perfected a self-monitoring system of looks (...). (Bennett 2009, 69)

Bennett describes how the mechanism underlying such "voluntarily self-regulating citizenship" is based on the constant self-observation

and mutual regulation of visitors within the 'museum system'. The museum functions as a machine of self-discipline to which one voluntarily submits. Coercive measures were not required, as being dominated was not necessarily conscious or apparent. Domination was a reciprocal process that involves the dominated through their consent and legitimizes itself at the same time.

1.2.1. *New Museum Approaches*

By the end of the 19th century, the modernist museum had firmly established itself as a powerful institution, setting the standard for museums in the 20th century. It was only during the latter half of the 20th century that the museum institution became the focal point of critical scrutiny, prompting a shift away from perceiving museums as objective and immutable entities towards recognizing them as integral components of a cultural system responsible for the generation of visibility, knowledge, and identity.

The concept of *New Museology*,[9] which developed in France in the 1970s and quickly spread worldwide, attempted to respond to a context of profound social, cultural, and political transformations. The increasing awareness of social inequalities during this period prompted the museum to devote greater attention to the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities. Cultural production, previously controlled by the upper classes of society, underwent a notable expansion in the 1960s. From the mid-1960s onwards, there was a substantial broadening of the social base participating in cultural processes, including previously marginalized groups. These developments, spurred by various factors characteristic of the era—shifts in the labor market, the self-assertion of marginalized communities, and the dissolution of a centralized cultural landscape (Stalder 2018)—led to significant alterations in how citizens and the public were incorporated into processes of cultural exchange, consequently reshaping their expectations regarding active involvement in them.

Given these transformations, New Museology aimed to depart from the conventional museum model, which centered on static object display, and instead advocated more dynamic and inclusive approaches that acknowledged the experiences and perspectives of visitors.

9 The concept of "New Museology" was primarily introduced by Georges Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine in the late 1960s. Rivière and De Varine emphasized the importance of actively involving local communities in museum processes, making museums more accessible and relevant to a wider range of people, and promoting cultural diversity and public participation. This new perspective has led to a series of practical innovations in museums, including the organization of more interactive exhibitions, the adoption of more inclusive curatorial approaches, and collaboration with local communities to develop educational and cultural programs (Mayrand 1985).

> (T)he most fundamental change that has affected museums during the half-century (note: referring to the second half of the 20th century) (...) is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them. (...) (I)ts visitors, usually not numerous, came to look, to wonder and to admire what was set before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum's prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors. (Hudson 1998, 43)

Museums are reconceptualized as institutions that promote active knowledge construction and democratic participation, a transition from being a place "about something" to being a place "for someone" (Meijer-van Mensch 2011, 83).

Contributing to this evolving perspective is the epistemological shift that unfolds during the 60's (Barthes 1967; Eco 1962), which underscores the fundamental role of the public in attributing meaning to artworks. Artists were among the first to challenge the authoritarian model of the museum. While avant-garde movements of the early 20th century had already criticized the museum (Bishop 2012), it was the participatory practices of the 1960s and 1970s that cast the spectator as an active co-creator of the final artwork. Artists such as Allan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys, Franz Erhard Walther, and Jannis Kounellis, among others, showed a critical stance toward the institution, manifesting a desire to challenge traditional artistic conventions and resist the status quo (Piontek 2017). Their participatory endeavors were driven by a political agenda aimed at democratizing art, dismantling the barriers between artist and spectator, and fostering active engagement between art and society. However, in many instances, participation was confined to physical involvement and did not substantially alter the institutional framework. Power structures and the hierarchical transmission of knowledge from the museum to the public largely remained intact (Schmidt-Wulffen 2022). Only in subsequent decades have some scholars advocated for a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between active and passive engagement (Bishop 2012; Rancière 2008), contesting the oversimplified dichotomy inherent in this interpretation. With the recognition of looking as an intentional activity (Schürmann 2019), space has emerged for the conception of a "diverse, pluralistic, and active" audience (Macdonald 2010, 61), capable of challenging the traditional hierarchical and authoritarian dynamics of the museum.

The 1970s marked the emergence of the concept of *institutional critique* within the realm of contemporary art. Coined to denote a critical examination of museum institutions, this term introduced a discourse on internal power dynamics and the exclusionary practices inherent in museums. Artists such as Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Michael Asher, among others, were pivotal figures in pioneering institutional critique during this period (Alberro and Stimson 2011). Through their artworks, they interrogated the conventional norms of the art institution, investigating the interplay between museums and their audiences. Often employing provocative strategies and direct interventions within exhibition spaces, these artists sought to expose underlying power dynamics and ideological frameworks. However, as analyzed, for example, by Andrea Fraser (2005), a key figure in the second generation of institutional critique during the 1990s, these critical attacks aimed at revising the power structures of museums resolved into mere artistic intervention when institutions managed to assimilate them. These practices do not truly threaten the power or authority of the museum, nor do they lead to radical changes. On the contrary, their assimilation generates a form of promotion for the institutions themselves, because through incorporating criticism, they neutralize it by demonstrating their ability to only formally engage in self-critique. Fraser called it the *institutionalization of critique*.

1.2.2. *Integrating Minorities*

The critique of museums has transcended their disciplinary boundaries. Emerging from constructivist and post-structuralist theories in the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a challenge to the traditional educational paradigm of museums, advocating instead for participatory approaches to meaning-making through dialogue (Davallon 1999; Dewey 1916; Mairesse and Desvallées 2007; Marstine 2006; McSweeney and Kavanagh 2016; Sandell 1998; Simon 2010; Vergo 1989). In response to these critiques, museums have been urged to decentralize their curatorial authority and embrace collaborative knowledge production with communities. Simultaneously, in the latter half of the 20th century, the deconstruction of humanistic paradigms and the emergence of postcolonial thought have challenged the role and canonical function of museums. Efforts towards reconciliation and restitution in the aftermath of the 19th and 20th-century wars have prompted museums to reconsider their collections, advocating for a redefined role within a cultural framework that promotes visibility, knowledge, and identity. The imperative to adopt new methodologies has led to processes involving both content and context, as well as meaning-making procedures. This shift has also entailed collaboration with the public to develop exhibitions and programs capable of

incorporating their perspectives and priorities through participatory, decolonial, and intercultural approaches.

In recent decades, there has been a shift towards more inclusive and diverse narratives within museums. Presently, it is acknowledged that the meanings attributed to objects are ambiguous rather than specific; there exists no singular interpretation of objects (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). This recognition necessitates a reevaluation of permanent exhibitions to incorporate voices and perspectives that have historically been marginalized or omitted. Numerous ethnographic and thematic museums worldwide have made considerable strides in this regard, undertaking initiatives to restructure themselves. Museum staff collaborate with communities to negotiate temporary solutions to emerging issues. An exemplary case is the Werkbundarchiv–Museum der Dinge in Berlin.[10] Focused on industrial design and applied arts, this museum engages into the play between objects, material culture, and society, furnishing a cultural framework to understand their significance for our everyday life. In 2022, the museum initiated a public consultation regarding the display of historical materials featuring the swastika symbol. Through explanatory materials provided alongside the artifacts, visitors were actively engaged in ongoing curatorial processes and participated in decisions regarding the contextualization of these contentious objects, being asked to express their stance on the possibility of exhibiting these materials and welcoming any suggestions on how to contextualize them within the exhibition.

Similarly, the Volkskundemuseum in Vienna[11] has long shared with its audiences the activity of signifying and resignifying the stored materials. Museum personnel actively encourage and collaborate on projects that propose alternative interpretations of the exhibited objects, thereby reshaping the institution's authority through public involvement. "Active participants of the museum include associations (...), artists or academics (...), museum members or curious visitors who accept the invitation to participate and interact" (Richter-Kovarik 2023). For instance, the initiative "Queer local history," curated by members of QWIEN—Center for Queer History, aimed to challenge the heteronormative interpretation of collection materials by museum curators in the 1990s. In response, project participants devised and

10 The Werkbundarchiv–Museum der Dinge in Berlin was founded in 1978 and is dedicated to promoting the knowledge and appreciation of industrial design and applied arts. Its collection includes a wide range of design objects, industrial products, and craft artifacts that illustrate the development and evolution of design over time.

11 The Volkskundemuseum in Vienna is committed to promoting understanding of popular cultures. It houses an extensive collection of folk art, historical artifacts, and cultural relics that illustrate the daily life, traditions, beliefs, and practices of European communities over time.

promoted a fictitious queer reinterpretation, which was presented to museum visitors during guided tours.[12] Visitors were only informed of the adopted strategy upon concluding the tour, prompting contemplation on the initiative's anti-hegemonic agenda.

Incorporating diverse audiences meaningfully within institutions creates intrica problems, particularly evident in museums of art, architecture, and design (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). A notable initiative in this regard is the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which introduced the *Wall of Leftovers*[13] in the spring of 2023. It had been dedicated to works by artists who contributed to the artistic canon of the past 150 years, but these works are now excluded from the museum's postcolonial narratives. While this might not be a definitive solution, it serves as a tangible representation of the ongoing challenges faced by the institution. In this instance, the visitors do not actively interfere, but curators involve them explicitly in their curatorial decisions.

1.2.3. *Privatization Processes*

Starting from the 1980s, the neoliberalization of the museum sector in Europe has led to significant transformations in the management of institutions. Faced with a reduction in public subsidies and rising operating costs (Semmel 2013), numerous public museums, historically reliant on state funding, have adopted a managerial governance. This entails the application of business-oriented principles to museum activities, grounded in metrics of efficiency and quantifiable outcomes. It includes thorough cost management and strategies to generate income, including intense marketing tactics and fundraising initiatives supporting the financial viability of the museum (Groys 2008). While this governance model was already prevalent in North America, its diffusion to Europe was facilitated by the proliferation of neoliberal policies advocating for increased private sector involvement in financing public institutions.

These processes have had a significant impact on museums over the past three decades. Revenue generation and accountability have emerged as crucial mechanisms for museums, as they are compelled to "demonstrate the value of culture" to secure new funding

12 The case study can be further explored here: Richter-Kovarik, Katharina. 2023. "Inventions, Speculations, Associations. Two Projects from Volkskundemuseum in Vienna." *Journal of Museum Education* 48(3): 249-255.

13 The reference stems from a personal experience during a museum visit in March 2023, in dialogue with curator Vincent van Velsen. There is no bibliographic documentation on the subject; however, the experience refers to a previous exhibition held a few years earlier at the De Appel arts center. More information about the conceptual frame can be found here: https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/32865/bourgeois-leftovers/.

(Heal 2013, 167). According to Sternfeld, "Today economies define more than ever how institutions act, what they collect and show, how they present themselves and how we imagine them" (Ausstellungstheorie Praxis 2022, 9:50). To assess the efficacy of these enacted processes, contemporary museums are expected to have output that is "productive, relevant, measurable, and useful" (Kundu and Kalin 2015). This transformation has been critically scrutinized:

> (...) following the neoliberal trend, many museums have abandoned their original function of educating citizens about the dominant culture and have been reduced to sites of entertainment for a public of consumers. The main objective of those 'post-modern' museums is to make money through blockbuster exhibitions and the sale of a manifold of products for tourists. The type of 'participation' that they promote is based on consumerism and they are actively contributing to the commercialization and depoliticization of the cultural field. (Mouffe 2013, 70)

Gielen (2013), in his examination of the repercussions of such policies on contemporary artistic institutions, underscores the prevailing trend of subjecting cultural production to continual quantitative assessment. Museums are compelled to demonstrate tangible outcomes, evaluate the efficacy of their endeavors, and ensure that such initiatives are perceived as both culturally and economically meaningful by visitors and funders. Of particular significance is the commodification of audience participation, wherein their engagement, quantified in numerical terms, serves as a crucial metric and validation of the museum's appeal. Gielen (2013) laments how this practice reduces the impact of experiences to mere quantitative measures, rendering each activity potentially interchangeable or, at the very least, comparable to any other. This phenomenon manifests what the sociologist terms *horizontality*—or horizontalism or flatness—a manifestation of the crisis of public art institutions, precipitated by the erosion of governmental support on a pan-European level.

This notion is further emphasized by Nora Sternfeld (2018), who described it as an "economization"[14] of museums. The imperative of social relevance has progressively undergone an economizing process through deliberate structural and institutional management strategies.

14 "Die Ökonomisierung, die alles in Zahlen verwandeln will" (2018, 17).

> Monetization, which seeks to turn everything into numbers, tends to stifle qualities and intermediate spaces, even and especially when trying to understand them. Jobs in museums have undoubtedly become more precarious, with most people working in museums having no guarantees for the future, programming pressure has massively increased, not least due to competition-based restructuring, while budgets are lower, and thus, despite apparently promising rhetoric for the future, there is a general 'leveling' of museum work. (2018, 17)[15]

Sternfeld's analysis delineates a cultural policy that fosters the commercialization of knowledge and collections, exerting pressure on institutions and shaping their agendas.

The emphasis on economic value and profitability often materializes through the deployment of marketing strategies geared towards maximizing public engagement, framing the audience more as consumers rather than as active participants or engaged citizens. Sternfeld critiques the neoliberal, transnational market-oriented conception of the museum, which has predominantly utilized processes of participation not to catalyze societal change, but rather to fuel capitalist expansion (Appendix: Sternfeld, 295). Under the guise of the 'imperative of participation,' neoliberalism has effectively co-opted and supplanted democratic calls for co-determination with superficial gestures of involvement. Sternfeld (2020) argues that within this framework, participation becomes not an emancipatory endeavor, but rather a hegemonically-infused institutional tactic.

Concurrently, Bernadette Lynch, in her research across various institutions in the United Kingdom, noted that museums are frequently recognized for their success without regard for the challenges and failures they encounter. Institutions are not encouraged "to reflect honestly and openly on the difficulties of their work" (2011, 445).

Increasingly reliant on sponsorship, donations, and partnerships with the private sector, museums find themselves compelled to prioritize commercialization and profitability. Consequently, larger organizations may prioritize exhibitions and events that attract a wider audience to generate substantial revenue. Bernhard Schulz defines this condition as the "sword of Damocles of the obligation to succeed" (2001, 147).[16]

15 Translation from German by the author.
16 Other scholars have subsequently expressed themselves in more emphatic terms: "market prostitution" (Parmentier 2007, 3), "McDonaldisation," or the commercialization of culture (Schwier 1990, 78).

1.2.4. *The Promises of the Digital Turn*

Over the past forty years, the impact of digital media on the museum sector has been pervasive and profound. The digital turn— the transition from a traditional and analog approach to a digital and technologically advanced one,— spanning from the 1990s to the 2000s, has influenced these institutions more rapidly and with greater impact than any other transformation in their recent history. The digital condition characterizing contemporary society, as delineated by Felix Stalder (2018), has accelerated a paradigmatic shift for museums, challenging entrenched modes of thought and operation. A decade ago, Ross Parry introduced the concept of the "post-digital" (2013) within the museum domain. This term does not so much suggest that digital media are universally and uniformly adopted and assimilated by all museums, but rather underscores their response to an already established digital condition. The term denotes a transition in the adoption of new media, a moment when technology has become normative, representing an "instrumental ought" (Barham 2012, 93), even in cases where its use may not be immediate or widespread. Particularly since 2020, the exigencies spurred by the pandemic have further accelerated processes of digitalization, rendering the integration of digital culture an almost imperative step for the survival and advancement of institutions.

Museums today employ digital tools across various domains, encompassing administrative management, the preservation of digitized artifacts, curating, and online connectivity (Parry 2010). In particular, the digital revolution has caused substantial shifts in the dynamics between cultural institutions and their audiences (Runnel et al. 2013). Nowadays, visitors interact with museums not only through the interpretative perspective offered by the institution, but "instead they use their own creative vision to interpret, reinterpret, and engage with museum spaces and collections" (Murphy 2016, 121). Oonagh Murphy underscores how new forms of visitor participation challenge the conventional authority of museums. While museums could traditionally dictate content, self-directed participation now transcends the confines of its governance, overruling its strategies.

> In an increasingly digital world, technology and remix culture have opened up avenues to participation. No longer do visitors need to be invited to participate, nor does participation necessarily need to exist within the scaffolded confines of museum practice. Increasingly, participation is becoming self-directed, with visitor-generated participatory practices existing in parallel to facilitated participatory opportunities offered by an institution. (Murphy 2016, 118)

Murphy delineates the diverse manifestations of these interventions:

> For some visitors, this means a quick snap on their phone, the addition of a funny comment, a physical response such as copying the pose in a painting, or editing a work of art using digital filters or text overlay, while for other visitors participation can be more sophisticated, longer-term, and strategic, from dedicated blogs to websites and apps. (ibid. 118)

As a result, it is no longer only the museum that determines the visitor's experience; visitors are now actively incorporating their digital behavior into their museum visits, changing what is expected from a museum experience. Presently, "people assume the right to co-opt and redistribute institutional content, not just to look at it. They seek opportunities for creative expression, both self-directed and in response to the media they consume" (Simon 2010, 350).

As early as 2000, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill envisioned a museum "not limited to its own walls," but rather as a reimagined structure that "moves as a set of processes into the spaces, the concerns and the ambitions of communities." (2000, 152). In the current digital milieu, it is imperative for museums to recalibrate their strategies, planning processes, workflows, practices, and programs to resonate with the expectations and behaviors of digitally empowered audiences if they are to maintain their relevance (Giannini and Bowen 2019, vii). Many institutions tackle these challenges by aligning with commercial trends, particularly in the realm of social media, employing already familiar strategies to engage audiences. This often involves integrating social initiatives, immersive digital or augmented reality experiences, developing virtual environments, or making digitized collections accessible to the public.

However, there is a significant lack of sustained critical reflection on these efforts. A consortium of Irish museums initiated research and analysis in 2022 regarding the adoption of technology in museum contexts. Their observations stem from the recognition that "the discourses on technology in cultural heritage tend to be promotional and uncritical, starting from an assumption that all upgrades are inherently good and progressive, and unwilling to ask the difficult questions that any 'not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society' must" (Muse-Tech Working Group 2023). This critique is echoed by numerous voices within the museum community. Mirko Zardini, former director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, for instance, underscores how these technological tools

have been assimilated not for transformative purposes, but rather for the strengthening and extension of preexisting educational and marketing strategies within museums (Appendix: Zardini, 227). Institutions have generally adapted new technologies to their traditional structures, proposing practices that still follow an educational mandate rather than critically engaging with a culture of digitalization.

The conventional narrative approach of museums no longer engages with the communication and interaction dynamics of contemporary society (Piontek 2017). In a cultural landscape characterized by interconnectedness and hypertextuality, museums persist in presenting "history or phenomena as a linear and unambiguous (development) model," which, however, "no longer corresponds to current experiences of society and science, as 'reality' is experienced fragmentarily, and we in a globalized world must think and act increasingly interconnected" (Piontek 2017, 22).[17] Once regarded as important hubs of education and enlightenment, museums now find their roles increasingly overshadowed by alternative institutions and media channels that provide swifter and more diverse pathways to knowledge and cultural enhancement (Meier 2000, 9).

These challenges increasingly question the social relevance of the museum (see, for example, Sandell 2002, 21). Factors that erode their legitimacy and call into question their role. One of the characteristics of the postmodern period is that cultural organizations have become much closer to their audience and more aware of those to whom they are speaking (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). In this context, participation and negotiation with audiences represents a profound departure from traditional museum practices, challenging the conventional perception of the museum as an authoritative voice and the visitor as a passive learner (Falk and Dierking 2013, 308). This aspect will be further discussed in the following section.

1.3. *Participation: Ultimate Solution or Smokescreen?*

The reasons behind the integration of participation into institutions have undergone a radical transformation over time. In the 1970s, artists' participatory actions were primarily driven by political motives, aiming to challenge the established order and blur the boundaries between high culture and popular culture. These initiatives sought to empower the public to intervene within institutional spaces recognized as producers of knowledge. Subsequently, from the 1990s onward, participation, particularly in ethnographic contexts, emerged as a response to the historical injustice perpetrated by the global north against indigenous populations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, museums embracing participatory approaches are influenced by the prevailing digital condition of contemporary society. This signifies a reversal of the historical trajectory, wherein participation was initially introduced from external sources into the museum environment; now, it is the museums themselves who are actively seeking to engage the public. The impetus behind contemporary museums' participatory endeavors lies in their desire to reestablish connections with their audiences. Participation is considered an effective means to counter criticisms of elitism and irrelevance. The active participation of audiences has been identified as the ideal solution to renegotiate the institution's relevance and create a direct and meaningful connection with them (Simon 2010; Meijer-van Mensch 2009). "Contemporary museology calls for inclusive museums that are not only responsive and engaging, but most of all participatory" (Meijer-van Mensch 2009). This is a notion that has been expressed and argued by various scholars in the field in recent years, both in Europe and America (Bernfeld 1993; Fürstenberg 2007; Meijer-van Mensch 2009; Parmentier 2007).[18]

Responding to the many social, cultural, and technological changes, museums are undergoing a transformation to more accessible, dynamic, and inclusive institutions, positioning themselves as "hubs (...) for interaction with the public" (Maleuvre 2010, 46). Public engagement has become the "guiding principle of museum work" (Reussner 2010, 2), marking a departure from viewing visitors merely as a "tolerated public" (Belting 2001, 35), to recognizing them as integral participants in the museum experience (Piontek 2017, 102). The 2010s have been defined as the "Participation Decade" (Klatt 2012, 3), underscoring museums' increased commitment to involving their audiences.

17 Translation from German by the author.

18 Some of the voices that have attempted to frame the ongoing "participatory turn" in recent decades include Dan Bernfeld, who asserted: "Museums must either become participative or disappear," identifying participation as the only possible solution for the survival of museums (1993, 52). This point was echoed by Meijer-van Mensch, who, describing a paradigm shift for the museum, referred to it as the "participation paradigm" (Meijer-van Mensch 2009, 51) or the "co-design paradigm" (Meijer-van Mensch 2009, 22), stating: "Contemporary museology calls for inclusive museums that are not only responsive and engaging, but most of all participatory" (Ibid., 49). Nina Simon also revisited the point, identifying active audience participation as the answer to the crisis of relevance facing cultural institutions (2010, i-ii). Participation is attributed with a positive "emancipatory effect" (Fürstenberg 2007, 23), especially in contexts working with marginalized groups on the fringes of society, where empowerment processes are sought. Michael Parmentier (Parmentier 2007, 7) sees the future of the museum in its repoliticized form as a site of social discourse, akin to a "modern agora." This role of the museum as a republican forum, as a modern agora, appears to be not only the most compelling option for the future of this institution but also more timely and urgent than ever.

Numeous scholars have traced these processes,[19] articulating them as "Forum" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, Lynch 2011), "Agora" (Parmentier 2007, van Mensch 2012), "Arena" (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2018), or simply as the "Participatory Museum" (Simon, 2010), to name but a few prominent examples. These conceptual frameworks, though varied in their approaches, converge on a common premise: they highlight the civic responsibility of the museum and emphasize its connection with audiences and communities.[20]

These processes are now also reflected in the new definition of a museum, approved by the ICOM community in August 2022 during the Extraordinary General Assembly in Prague. The text reads:

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (ICOM 2022)

The updated definition, now serving as a guideline for the international museum community, places new emphasis on the role of the public within institutions. It highlights and values the active participation of the public in museum activities, thereby formalizing the idea of a "participatory turn" (Milevska 2006).[21] Contemporary museums have overcome the mere assertion of being 'open to the public,' as stipulated in the 2007 ICOM definition. Instead, they actively acknowledge and

19 In addition to those already mentioned, it is possible to add others to the list, such as "centre for civic debate" (Wallace 2006, 123), "centre for cultural exchange" (Vogelsang 2012, 206), "platform for social change" (Baur 2008, 42), "laboratory" (Basu and Macdonald 2014, 70), "socialLAB" or "laboratory for social change" (Jank 2012, 153), or "experimental space for social utopias" (Sommer-Sieghart 2009, 87).

20 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill used the term "Forum" to describe the museum as a place for the exchange of ideas. She emphasized the museum's role as a social and cultural space where people can meet, share, and discuss diverse perspectives and knowledge. She describes the post-museum (2000) composed of many voices and perspectives. Bernadette Lynch calls for the museum to become a forum "for working with communities to attempt to re-think the museum idea itself" (Lynch 2001, 9). Michael Parmentier (2007) sees the future of the museum in its repoliticized form as a "modern Agora", a place of social discussion. Leontine van Mensch invokes the museum as an "Agora" in a socio-political sense, as "a marketplace of ideas, providing space for conversations" (2012, 87). Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2018) looks at the museum as an Arena for cultural citizenship, exploring modes of engagement for audience empowerment. Nina Simon (2010) envisions the "Participatory Museum" as a platform for exchange.

21 This transition has also been recognized with various paraphrases by other scholars: "collaborative turn" (Lind 2007b) or "participation paradigm" (van Mensch & Mejer-van Mensch 2011). Markus Miessen speaks of a "participatory era" (Miessen 2012, 7), Joachim Baur refers to a "Museum 2.0" (Baur 2008, 47), and the van Mensch, as mentioned earlier, discuss the "application of a new participation paradigm in the museum" (van Mensch & Mejer-van Mensch 2011, 54).

engage with different publics, extending invitations for collaborative participation in the institution's endeavors. However, the practical implementation and outcomes of participation remain subject of ongoing debate. Despite extensive discussions on the topic in recent years among museum professionals, in conferences, and on online forums, a comprehensive dialogue grounded in empirical evidence has yet to yield a generally agreed-upon framework (Piontek 2017). Presently, participation in museums manifests itself in different approaches and practices, often lacking coherence or alignment with one another. Nora Sternfeld terms this phenomenon the "imperative of participation" (2018, 73), highlighting a context where participation appears to be a compulsory aspect for contemporary institutions, introduced into their activities without consistently adhering to the underlying values it entails.

The term *participation* encompasses indeed a spectrum of interpretations, as noted by museologists Leontine and Peter van Mensch, who describe it as an "umbrella term" used to denote a wide array of objectives and practices (van Mensch & Mejer-van Mensch 2011, 56). This echoes what Cornelia Ehmayer said about the challenge of operationalizing the concept of participation in practical museum settings. While much of the literature on museum participation originates from the field of artistic mediation, suggesting that participation is predominantly viewed in museums through an educational lens, cultural and artistic mediators often struggle to reach a consensus on its precise definition (Ehmayer 2002, 39).

The emergence of participatory practices stems from various motivations, notably influenced by post-colonial discourses and the digital revolution in recent decades. While the underlying premises of these processes are discernible, disentangling the influence exerted differently by these distinct phenomena and understanding their interplay and overlapping dynamics poses a significant challenge.

Participatory practices emerge in response to the 'reflexive turn'[22] witnessed between the 1980s and 1990s, which challenged the perception of museums as objective and timeless institutions. Instead, they are recognized as integral components of a cultural system involved in the production of visibility, identity, and knowledge (Sternfeld 2028, 23). Post-colonial and feminist critiques have ignited debates concerning the representation of identities and the inclusion

22 The 'reflexive turn' occurred primarily in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the social sciences and humanities, as a critical response to modernism and the positivist idea of objective and neutral knowledge. It began to be recognized that all knowledge is constructed and mediated by the perspectives, biases, and social and cultural positions of the researchers themselves.

of previously marginalized social groups in museum narratives. Participation is often credited with a positive "emancipatory effect" (Piontek 2017) facilitating processes of empowerment for historically marginalized communities. Contemporary curatorial practices strive to involve these diverse communities, thereby integrating a wide spectrum of voices and perspectives into exhibitions.

The impact of these endeavors is gradually manifested in the thematic scope and content presented in many contemporary museums. For instance, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, has recently restructured its collection under the thematic framework of 'Delinking and Relinking' up to the year 2026. The two terms are concepts rooted in post-colonial studies and decolonization theories, denoting the process of dismantling colonial dependency (*delinking*) and establishing new connections (*relinking*) based on principles of justice and equality. The project stems from the museum's recognition of its involvement in the country's colonial past and the subsequent attempt to critically reflect on this legacy.[23] The installation is described as "polyvocal, accessible, playful, and for all senses, amplifying voices of hidden stories and relations behind the surface of art" (Esche et al. 2021). For this project, various community groups were involved and asked to share their perspectives on the collection. Three different groups in particular created special tours through the exhibition: a local community interested in the legacies and continuities of Dutch colonial history produced the 'Broader Story Tour;' a community of cultural professionals with body diversity created the 'Bodily Encounters Tour;' and The Office of Queer Affairs, a queer community from Eindhoven, developed a 'Love Letter Tour.' The collection was thus reinstalled and presented along these three axes, as a series of encounters between artworks, stories, and visitors. The first highlights events and relationships that have shaped the museum's collection. The second interacts with the visitor's body, seeking to interrupt the visual dominance of modernist tradition, exploring instead touch, smell, and various sensory combinations to access different registers of emotion and understanding. The third path offers a reinterpretation of stories by introducing previously neglected or repressed narratives, allowing space for plural and conflicting narratives to coexist.

23 Henri van Abbe was a Dutch entrepreneur and collector. Although he was not the founder of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the museum is named after him because he donated a significant collection of modern art to the municipality of Eindhoven in 1936, thereby contributing to the establishment of the museum (Ausstellungstheorie Praxis 2022, 39:00).

1.3.1. *A Post-democratic Context*

The discourse on participation must be situated in a context of profound political changes during the past half-century. Since the 1990s, scholars (Žižek 1989; Rancière 2004; Mouffe 2000; Crouch 2004; Fisher 2009; Agamben 2013; Brown 2015; Berardi 2017; Stalder 2018) have described these transformations as the rise of post-democracy in Western society: a weakening of democratic structures due to their economization and the disillusionment of citizens who feel increasingly alienated from politics.[24] "The End of History," with the fall of the Berlin Wall, envisioned as the beginning of a post-ideological era (Bell 1960; Fukuyama 1992), has instead marked the onset of a post-political era.

For Jacques Rancière this shift to post-politics results from a suppression of conflicts and tensions in society, favoring a consensus-based model of democracy. This approach eschews the articulation of diverse opinions and viewpoints in favor of an idealized harmony, thus consolidating existing power structures and perpetuating the status quo (2004, 7). Rancière argues that the active presence of the people (the *demos*) has been abolished and replaced by processes of simulation and modeling such as opinion polls, focus groups, and plans for various scenarios—all guided by technocrats (1999, 102). Dissent is thus reduced to administrative procedures, where tension and conflict lose their critical potential and are resolved through technical and rational calculation. "Consensus, then, is actually the modern form of reducing politics to the police" (Rancière 2004, 7), a reduction of politics to the logic of control and management of social order, limiting its mandate as a tool of emancipation and social change.

Even in instances where political discourse appears polarized, as seen in the rise of populist and xenophobic movements both in Europe and the US, this polarization represents a radicalized form of the post-political paradigm. As highlighted by Slavoj Žižek in the afterword of Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*, this form of radicalized conflict is an extreme version of the post-political phase: "the most cunning and radical version of this disavowal is ultra-politics, the attempt to depoliticize conflict by way of bringing it to an extreme via the direct militarization of politics" (Žižek in Rancière 2004a, 71).

The insights of Rancière resonate in the reflections of Chantal Mouffe, who argues that Western governments today take shape as

24 For instance, Colin Crouch speaks of an "abolishment of democratic institutions in the name of efficiency" (2004, 4), referring to a context where citizens play a passive, quiescent, and apathetic role, responding only to the signals sent to them. This evolution constitutes an erosion of democratic institutions but also a shift in the legitimation of public activity. Felix Stalder, on the other hand, speaks of a *normalization of post-democracy:* "(...) many people consider it normal to be excluded from decisions that affect broad and significant areas of their life" (2018, 146-147).

various incarnations of the neoliberal model. Within Western democracies, there is a discernible trend towards excluding or minimizing moments of social conflict from representation or discourse. These liberal systems strive to "achieve a 'rational' consensus, that is, one that is fully inclusive" (Mouffe 2007, 15-16), by eradicating conflict and impeding political dialectics. Consequently, conflict—largely stemming from the contradictions inherent in the capitalist paradigm—fails to deliver appropriate perspectives for development and expression. This epitomizes the profoundly post-political or post-democratic nature of neoliberalism, presenting it as an inevitable state of affairs without alternatives. In the realm of liberal political philosophy and the democracy it engenders, Mouffe elucidates how:

> [...] the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which is unable to grasp adequately the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails [...] The typical liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values and that, due to empirical limitations, we will never be able to adopt them all, but that, when put together, they constitute a harmonious ensemble. This is why this type of liberalism must negate the political in its antagonistic dimension. Indeed, one of the main tenets of this liberalism is the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason. (Mouffe 2008, 8)

The repercussions of this political development on individuals include a surge in individualism and a waning interest in and apathy towards public participation (Reckwitz 2020). In such an individualized and atomized society, individuals are compelled, under the threat of perpetual disadvantage, to view themselves as the locus of action, as the architects of their own biographies, capabilities, orientations, relationships, and so forth (Beck 1992, 135).

Embedded within this evolving social landscape, contemporary participatory endeavors in museums predominantly seek to preserve a consensus forged among the involved parties. In many instances, cultural institutions do not espouse the underlying values inherent in participatory processes, nor do they give to the public the opportunity to negotiate the activities and content presented to them. Rather, participants' contributions are channeled into experiences with predetermined outcomes, such as co-creation activities within museum educational programs, feedback solicited through surveys, or involvement in focus groups (Baur 2008; Groten 2019). The majority of interactive initiatives proposed often amount to no more than "simulations of interactive events" (Hüther 2010, 349) culminating in predefined and programmed responses, which can be replicated indefinitely by subsequent visitors in a similar manner. According to Bernadette Lynch (2011), these projects offer only an "illusion of creative participation," a "lite empowerment," that is, a "light" or "spared" version of participatory processes, far from actually engaging participants in crucial issues or providing space for authentic discussions. These activities, lacking in critical examination of their underlying assumptions, implicitly presuppose a dimension where "(t)he first instance of consensus is already evident in an agreement upon a problematic, which 'they' have seen in 'their' own way" (Keshavarz and Mazé 2013).

1.3.2. *Participation and Dissent*

In reaction to this context, numerous scholars (Lynch 2011; Mörsch 2011; Kidd 2014; Kundu and Kalin 2015; Sternfeld 2018) have criticized the conception and execution of participation in museums as a manifestation of neoliberal management. These initiatives, primarily geared towards quantitatively assessing the audience, do little to disrupt the traditional roles of the parties involved. Participation often unfolds within a top-down consultative model that perpetuates entrenched power dynamics.[25] Consequently, there exists a dissonance between cultural institutions' professed adherence to participatory models and their retention of control as an absolute prerogative (Lynch 2011, and 2014; Spock 2009; Takahisa 2011). While museums rationalize the use of scaffolded experiences to facilitate audience engagement (Simon 2010), such justification overlooks that they maintain authority, control, and exclusive access. Despite the aim of collaborating "on equal footing," the exchange or collaboration is marked by a power asymmetry, evident in the requirement for a museum invitation—or at the very least, approval—for participation (Kravagna 1998, 30).

For over a decade, Markus Miessen has critically examined participation, underlining the aim to minimize friction by adopting participatory practices (2010, 54). He contributed to the discourse by introducing a practice-based perspective. Participation within the architecture and design realm is often construed as a tool for achieving consensus, emphasizing positivity and political correctness, thereby facilitating passive engagement within social structures. Miessen sarcastically labels this context as the "Regime of Harmonistan" (2010).

25 "(C)o-production conceals, while further buttressing, existing power hierarchies" (Kundu and Kalin 2015).

In such processes, participation is adopted as "an expedient method of placation rather than a real process of transformation" (2010, 32). Instead, Miessen advocates for a problematization of participatory practices: "to participate in any environment or situation, it is necessary to understand the conflicting forces acting on that environment to actively participate in it" (2010, 53).

This is consistent with observations made by Cornelia Ehmayer, who pointed out that the final outcome of decision-making processes is significantly influenced by two factors: the participants' relationship with decision-making structures and the effectiveness of their influence (2002). Consequently, it is crucial not only to consider the extent to which participants can influence a "common cause" in comparison to powerful actors but also to examine which decisions they are authorized to participate in (ibid., 42). As Ehmayer asserts, "(a)ctivating is not participation per se, but it is a condition for achieving participation" (ibid).

This critique does not undermine the general value of participation but rather interrogates the manner in which institutions frame it. Museums often avoid an open approach, because they fear losing control (Jaschke and Sternfeld 2015, 171; Piontek 2017, 80). Given that participation is deemed to be something that "cannot be taught, but must be experienced" (Moser 2010, 74), the potential openness presents a risk not only to the possible impact and economic viability of such initiatives but also to the stability of the institution itself.

Anja Piontek describes how historically the conception of participation has predominantly been articulated from the perspective of the 'powerful' or 'holders,' whether at the level of individuals or groups. The party in power to allocate participation controls the participatory process. Consequently, the party with lesser power assumes a more reactive and passive role (Piontek 2017, 74). The participatory process thus unfolds as a distinctly structured and directed sequence of actions and reactions, of giving and receiving, which entails well-defined roles and behavioral patterns. According to Piontek, therefore, the original connotation of the term 'participation' did not conceive of the participant as an active and engaged agent but rather as a passive recipient.

The analysis resonates with the research conducted by Silke Feldhoff. Drawing upon the insights of linguist Ralf Heuer-Meuthrath, Feldhoff highlights a significant semantic difference between the terms 'participatory' and 'participative.' Adjectives suffixed with '-ive' typically denote an active capacity, whereas those suffixed with '-ory' connote a specific duty or outcome (Feldhoff 2009). In the museum context, while both adjectives are often used interchangeably, 'participative' implies an individual's active engagement and direct involvement in an activity. Conversely, 'participatory' suggests that individuals are extended an invitation or provided with an opportunity to participate.[26] Thus, the idea of participation not only pertains to the dynamics between actors but also implicitly or explicitly addresses the distribution of power among them (Mayrberger 2013, 99).

Numerous scholars have underscored that participation extends beyond mere involvement in activities; it also entails actively engaging with the structures that govern participation itself, thereby contributing to the definition of decisions. Thus, participation transcends mere engagement, encompassing an interrogation of the rules that influence formation, communication, and representation within institutions.[27]

1.3.3. *Institutional Transformation*

In examining this issue, a recent case study offers valuable insights. From 2016 to 2021, the Tate Modern in London launched the 'Tate Exchange' program under the curatorship of Anna Cutler, then Director of Learning and Research. This initiative aimed to create connections between the museum, local organizations, artists, and the public, fostering an exploration of artistic processes and practices that challenged conventional notions of art in relation to societal issues. An entire floor of Tate Modern was dedicated to this project, hosting over 400 events and activities in its inaugural year alone, with more than 850,000 participants (both in person and online) over the project's five-year duration. Cutler described the diverse range of activities: "There was dancing, writing, talking, designing, testing, watching, playing etc. There were opportunities for families, projects for schools, and programmes for adults and seniors, available in different formations over time and run by a range of practitioners and artists" (2018).

Tate selected artists to develop programs aligned with the inclusive and participatory ethos of Tate Exchange, aiming to engage the public in collaboration with external organizations. "(Artists) were invited to construct a program either with the public or for the public to engage with and participate in" (Cutler 2018). Cutler observed that while the project's brief was broad and adaptable, "Interestingly, only one collective opted for the former (i.e. with the public from the

26 "Im Ergebnis meint 'partizipatorisch' das intendierte, vorerst lediglich potenzielle Ermöglichen aktiver Teilhabe und sozialer Beziehungen, beschreibt die Zielsetzung einer Arbeit. 'Partizipativ' hingegen meint eine aktive Teilhabe, die tatsächlich stattgefunden hat, beschreibt also das Ergebnis einer Aktion, eines Projektes" (Feldhoff 2009, 22).

27 "Participation not as a means to an end, but as an expression of [...] emancipation or the "giving of voice", and of locally expressed democracy." Beyond an invitation to collaborate and towards making sure that people can participate, i.e. attention for power imbalances, different abilities and capacities in framing and contributing to a collaborative design process. Britton, G. M. (2017). *Co-Design and Social Innovation: Connections, Tensions and Opportunities*. NY: Routledge.

beginning of the project) and even then the program was designed in a way to invite people to co-construct with an idea already in mind. (..) The artists involved struggled to work within a discursive model, operating instead on the basis of transmission" (ibid.).

The imperative to deliver tangible outcomes within prescribed timeframes led participating artists to favor established and predictable methodologies. A form of practice characterized by temporary collaboration rather than sustained engagement over time. While such approaches enable museums to present their offerings as responsive to visitor expectations, encouraging creative input and diverse perspectives, they often perpetuate unchanged power dynamics in dialogue management. Consequently, forms of involvement within museums frequently translate into mere acts of appropriation, wherein voices are documented but not really valued, reducing the institution to a mere repository of accumulated perspectives (Boast 2011).

Drawing upon the insights of Antonio Gramsci (1947), Nora Sternfeld challenges the prevailing model of 'transformative' participatory practice, when she argues that it fails to address power relations effectively. Instead, Sternfeld advocates for a truly 'transformative' approach affecting fundamental redistributions of power and resources.[28] When she differentiates the 'collaborative' practice from an antihegemonic one, Sternfeld emphasizes the need to confront and challenge existing power structures head-on. In the center of her argument is the rejection of the identities, inherently defined by the power-structures of the museum. Sternfeld proposes a shift towards a "new post-identitarian concept of us" to disrupt the cycle of inclusion and exclusion perpetuated by identity-based categorizations (2012, 124). Despite the good intentions behind these practices, they often perpetuate hierarchical structures. Thomas Michael Walle, former curator at the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo, highlights the risk of reinforcing processes of othering and exclusion within participative projects, particularly those involving migrants. Walle notes how such initiatives, while well-intentioned, often inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and dichotomies, ultimately perpetuating exclusion rather than fostering genuine inclusion (Walle 2013, 91).

However, the aspiration of museums to be 'a place for everyone' often obscures the explicit acknowledgment of inequalities within their frameworks (Mörsch 2011, 16). Sturm described this phenomenon as the "blind spot of empowerment," where the visibility of the marginalized does not translate into empowerment but may, in fact, uphold

28 "Partizipation hat mit der Möglichkeit zur Transformation zu tun" (Sternfeld 2018, 77).

existing power structures (2000, 182). Sturm argues for an approach to participative practice that prioritizes transparency and critical reflexivity, eschewing exaggerated promises or attempts to gloss over inherent power imbalances. While such an approach may entail discomfort and disillusionment for participants, it fosters critical awareness and self-reflection, potentially contributing to the transformation of existing systems (Sturm 2000, 125).

Sternfeld's concept of "counter-discourse" offers a strategic approach to challenge the dominant paradigm within museums as vehicles of power and control. It involves exposing the constructed nature of the museum system and actively contesting the entrenched values it embodies (Sternfeld 2010, 30). This process necessitates the agency of informed and aware actors who are willing to engage with and confront the existing system—a multifold aspect that will be further elucidated in the subsequent chapter. In her vision of a transformative institution, Sternfeld draws upon insights from Carmen Mörsch (2011). Mörsch emphasizes a crucial but often overlooked aspect of participation in museums: its potential benefits. Participants, contributing their insights, their 'cultural capital,' free of charge, can catalyze new forms of artistic and cultural expression. In general their involvement, particularly from marginalized communities, can enhance the museum's public image as socially engaged and inclusive. Mörsch critiques museums for frequently falling short in granting participants meaningful access to the institutional decision-making process. For Mörsch, the illusory but not actually practiced belonging of participants is an ethical problem: "As long as museums do not consider themselves [...] partners in the redistribution of power, the question arises about the ethical dimension of their participation efforts. What does it mean to give people the illusion of belonging while at the same time reserving the right to decide how far this belonging goes?" (Mörsch 2011, 15).[29]

Mörsch advocates for a paradigm shift in participatory practice, one that transcends mere visibility or token participation. She contends that true participation necessitates a reconfiguration of power dynamics within museums—a fundamental restructuring of the rules governing decision-making processes. Drawing on Rancière's notion of *distribution of the sensible*,[30] Mörsch asserts the importance

29 "Solange sich Museen nicht [...] als Partnerinnen bei der Umverteilung von Macht verstehen, stellt sich daher die Frage nach der ethischen Dimension ihrer Partizipationsbemühungen. Was bedeutet es, Leuten die Illusion zu vermitteln, dazuzugehören und sich gleichzeitig die Entscheidung vorzubehalten, wie weit das Dazugehören geht?" (Mörsch 2011, 15).

30 The theory of the *distribution of the sensible* (2004a) by Jacques Rancière is based on the idea that the distribution of perceptions, spaces, and roles within a society is fundamentally political and that it is the result of an arbitrary division between what is considered sensible and

of challenging existing power relations in shaping what is visible and sayable within the museum space. This entails a political struggle for the redistribution of power and the democratization of visibility, disrupting prevailing hierarchies (Mörsch 2006a, 218).

For Mörsch, then, "participation in the museum means, on the part of the institution, taking a stand for those it calls upon to work to increase its added value" (Mörsch 2006a, 15). In this sense, participatory practice must have transformative consequences for the museum institution itself (2006b, 25). It thus urges institutions to "take a stand" (Mörsch 2006b) for participants, critically reflecting on their own privileges and making them public, and then actively placing them at the service of collaboration and "redistribution of power" (Mörsch 2006b, 15). Drawing on Rancière, Mörsch (2006a, 218) advocates for an approach where both parties view themselves as learners.[31] This aspect is especially pertinent when considering the traditional educational role of museums. In this context, the museum's role shifts towards creating a framework where it acknowledges that visitors may not necessarily absorb the intended message, as factual knowledge is no longer the primary focus of communication.[32]

In support of such a repoliticization and democratization of participation in museums, the concepts of 'dissensus' (Rancière 1995) and 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe 2000), discussed in the previous paragraph, play a fundamental role in imbuing the activity with a critical dimension. Laclau and Mouffe's (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) distinction between 'politics' and the 'political'[33] highlights, beyond the politics of the everyday, an antagonistic and conflictual dimension of a democratic society in general, a conflictuality of constitutive value.

> Only by recognizing 'the political' in its antagonistic dimension can we address the central issue of democratic politics. This issue, despite what many liberals would have us believe, is not about negotiating a compromise between competing interests, nor is it about achieving a 'rational' consensus, one that is entirely inclusive. Contrary to what many liberals want us to believe, the specificity of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the opposition between us and them, but the different way in which it is dealt with. (Mouffe 2007, 15-16)

Mouffe places the irreducibility of conflict at the center of a democratic society. She understands the political as the space to keep open and alive a constant confrontation. And she insists that it should not be 'resolved' through a rational, unanimous, and perennial consensus. Similarly, the concept of 'dissensus' (*mésentente*) expressed by Rancière seeks to reformulate the idea of democracy by placing the moment of conflict at the center of the democratic process. In this sense, dissent represents an opportunity to produce change and social transformation through critical dialogue. Applied to the museum context, the thoughts of Mouffe and Rancière indicate a post-consensual practice (Miessen 2016), an approach that goes beyond the harmonious ideal and as the ultimate goal of an ongoing participatory process. Such a practice encourages active and critical participation, accepting and including dissent as part of any encounter and decision-making process. The goal is not necessarily to reach unanimous agreement but rather to create spaces where conflict can emerge constructively and give rise to new perspectives and solutions. For this purpose, however, it is essential that all involved parties understand and operate to change the forces at play in the environment being intervened upon.

1.4. *Museums Translating Agonistic Politics into Practice*

"Very often institutions reproduce an alleged neutrality within the contemporary debate. But institutions are never neutral, their positioning is always political" contends Mirko Zardini, former director of the CCA in Montreal (Appendix: 229). Zardini advocates for institutions to articulate their stance unambiguously: "The idea of an institution's neutrality is impractical, every institution should have the courage to have its own, recognisable voice" (ibid.). Zardini argues that museums face an insurmountable challenge in striving for inclusivity by accommodating all voices. Attempting to maintain a position 'above' by incorporating myriad perspectives is impossible. Instead, he suggests, "the institution can (...) promote different readings and narratives that clash with each other and demonstrate the impossibility of a single narrative. Leave open spaces of conflict and difference by revealing them. (...) By exposing and embracing spaces of conflict and divergence, institutions can authentically engage with the complexities of society" (ibid.).

what is not. This extends beyond the realm of institutions and government but is also present in what he calls the "aesthetic field," which encompasses the domains of art and culture.

31 In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), Rancière criticizes traditional education for perpetuating social inequalities and maintaining the status quo rather than fostering intellectual emancipation. He challenges traditional hierarchies in education, suggesting that students can instead learn autonomously. In this case, the concept of the "ignorant schoolmaster" refers to the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning rather than the sole holder of knowledge.

32 "whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe" (Rancière 1991, 18).

33 While the first term refers to the set of practices, tools, and actors necessary for the organization and functioning of a form of government –the structures and mechanisms that make governance possible– the substantivized adjective "political" describes a condition of democratic society characterized by continuous opposition and competition, experienced and expressed in a multitude of forms: from debates to acts of provocation, from protest to resistance (Mouffe 2007).

Zardini emphasizes that museums cannot lay claim to comprehensive inclusivity across all societal groups. Rather, they should initiate diverse and, at times, conflicting narratives, navigating inherent tensions. Institutions should not position themselves as detached observers but actively shape discourse and construct their publics: "The museum starts a conversation with its voice, then this kind of process should evolve by developing the discourse in different ways" (ibid.).

Similarly, Bernadette Lynch intends to enable participants as active citizens, through museum collaboration, promoting critical thinking, conscious expression of opinions, and participation in cultural, social, and political life: "A substantial form of democratic engagement lived through museum participation is [...] one in which people might start to exercise their political agency as citizens and might include processes of mobilization and local cultural and social activism" (2011b, 455). She emphasizes the importance of autentic and inclusive participation, particularly in fostering the formulation of critical inquiries, even if they challenge the established orthodoxy of the museum (2001, 8).[34] She critiques the prevailing tendency in museums to avoid conflicts in participative scenarios, producing a "false consensus"[35] that preserves comfort zones rather than allowing for a "zone of conflict" (2011a, 154, and 2011b, 453). Drawing on the insights of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), Lynch advocates for a departure from this approach, asserting that creating spaces for negotiating conflicts can yield more beneficial outcomes and contribute to addressing social disparities (2011a, 154). The overarching goal of the democratic and participatory museum, according to Lynch, is to cultivate trust in processes that cannot be predetermined by the institution. Engaged in a study of various museum realities in the UK (2011c), Lynch has demonstrated how collaborative projects, in addition to their potential for emancipation and social inclusion, are also essential for the museum sector itself, constituting "the only way (...) for museums and galleries to look clearly at their own practices" (2011). By embracing the external perspective of the community, museums have the opportunity to address their own 'blind spots' and initiate change within the institution. Lynch underscores the urgency of this evolution, asserting

34 "Real social inclusion allows for questions to be asked that inevitably challenge the museum orthodoxy, at the very least through the introduction of new cultural perspectives" (Lynch 2001, 8).

35 The term "false consensus" was coined by development political scientist John Gaventa in his book *Power and Powerlessness* (1980). Gaventa conducted research on political dynamics and power relations in rural communities in the Southern United States, using the concept of "false consensus" to describe a situation where apparent consensus is based on a lack of awareness of alternatives or the illusion of an inability to change things.

that "the museum must become a forum for working with communities to attempt to re-think the museum idea itself" (2001, 9).

In this context, the concept of "threshold institutions" introduced by Stavros Stavrides (2017) offers valuable insights. Stavrides conceptualizes threshold institutions as counter-institutions characterized by principles of power-sharing, equality, and solidarity. He examines practices and institutions that facilitate the empowerment and active participation of citizens in the creation of democratic and inclusive urban spaces. These initiatives eschew top-down imposition in favor of emergent processes grounded in practical experimentation, resulting in formations that are inherently "contradictory, ambiguous, and messy" (Stavrides 2017, 56). While initially formulated within the realm of urban studies, the concept of threshold institutions has been adapted and applied to museums and cultural institutions, such as in the case of Casco Art Institute in Utrecht (Choi et al. 2018). The aim is to facilitate a transition from static, self-referential institutions to dynamic, interactive spaces where the public plays a significant role in both the production and consumption of cultural experiences.

Anja Piontek seems to look into such a threshold museum when she describes genuine participation as requiring an empty space, devoid of preconceived notions or agendas. The museum should not aim to "satisfy or fill a false gap" (2017, 89), but rather initiate a serious and open-ended process. For Piontek, a participatory museum fosters exchanges characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics yet grounded in voluntary engagement, transparency, and genuine mutual interest. It seeks reciprocity and equality, avoiding exploitation or instrumentalization of either party. Participation, in this sense, is an ongoing process aimed at mutual learning and respect, with the potential for substantive and enduring change. Such a perspective views participation as a dynamic movement rather than a predetermined outcome, prioritizing the democratic experience over tangible results.

Léontine Meijer-van Mensch imagines extending possible involvement to the management area of museums, a discussion already underway in some institutions in the Netherlands (Meijer-van Mensch 2011; Piontek 2012a, 1), where the debate on co-determination and participation is also moving to the administrative area of institutions under the heading of governance. Imagining the museum as an Agora, the museologist proposes a reconsideration of the concept of community, moving from a closed target group to a new open concept of community. Describing the museum as "a marketplace of ideas that offers space for conversations," she opens up to the fact that participation could generate communities that, united by their shared interest

in a structure, theme, or specific objects or by their commitment to a common cause, are defined as "community of passion" (Meijer-van Mensch 2011, 54). The goal, therefore, is not universal participation but rather universal access to participation should individuals choose to engage.[36] Given these insights, it becomes essential to outline the conditions that promote the development of post-consensual practices within museum settings.

Museums, by their nature, are not inherently sites of radical praxis; rather, akin to other public and bourgeois educational institutions such as schools and libraries, they primarily serve to uphold existing social structures. However, within their historical trajectory lies a latent promise of emancipation, suggesting that they may hold potential contributions to an alternative societal framework, even if this entails a contradiction of what they represent. Despite the obstacles and operational deficiencies prevalent in contemporary museum practices, "instead of celebrating the destruction of all institutions as a move towards liberation, the task for a radical politics is to engage with them, developing their progressive potential and converting them into sites of opposition to the neoliberal market hegemony" (Mouffe 2013, 71). Mouffe advocates not withdrawing from institutions, but rather fostering a strategy of "engagement with institutions" (2013, 68). A crucial concept for her to challenge neoliberalism and implement a radical democracy.

> (M)useums and art institutions could make a decisive contribution to the proliferation of new public spaces fomenting agonistic forms of participation where radical democratic alternatives to neoliberalism could be imagined and cultivated. (2013, 74)

Applying the concepts of redistribution of the sensible proposed by Rancière, some museums are transforming into listeners and 'ignorant' partners for their audiences. In this reframed paradigm, the museum actively engages with diverse communities, collaborating with them to shape the parameters of discursive practices, which become intrinsic to its overarching cultural framework. This way to access knowledge serves to reconfigure power dynamics and renegotiate the traditional mandate of the institution (Tanga 2021).

Already in 2000, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill proposed a new form of museum, where exhibitions are only one among many other mediums of communication.

> The production of events and exhibitions as conjoint dynamic processes enables the incorporation into the museum of many voices and many perspectives. Knowledge is no longer unified and monolithic; it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective—rather a cacophony of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values. The voice of the museum is one among many. (2000, 152)

When the museum is conceived as a social construct continually shaped by myriad actors, individual authority diminishes, creating space for diverse forms of intelligence of unique history and of individual need, transcending established epistemic boundaries.

As delineated in the preceding paragraph, these are intricate processes necessitating informed, conscientious, and proficient agents, both among museum staff and the audiences. The ability to take action relies not only on personal inclination but also on material resources, especially in a context where neoliberal policies restrict many people from obtaining the resources needed to exercise this freedom.

While the primary motivations of most museum visitors do not inherently incline towards civic or democratic engagement (McKinley Parrish 2010), it remains incumbent upon museums to imbue the public sphere with social and civic significance (Garcia 2013). Simultaneously, it is the responsibility of governments to acknowledge the value of these institutions and provide support, recognizing them as platforms for discourse, communal engagement, and contemplation conducive to fostering a shared democratic ethos within contemporary societies.

1.4.1. *Communities of Practice*

The concept of *community of practice* can aid in comprehending how museums can play an emancipatory role in connection to a shared community. The notion, introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), is widely used in various disciplines of social sciences, particularly in the field of organizational learning, organizational theory, and social practice. For Lave and Wenger, communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Snyder et al. 2003, 17). These communities operate as "social learning systems" (ibid.) in which practitioners connect to solve problems, share ideas, establish standards, build tools, and develop relationships with peers.

In contrast to cognitive learning theories, Lave and Wenger propose a perspective wherein knowledge is viewed as "provisional,

36 "Das Ziel wäre dementsprechend nicht, dass alle am Museum partizipieren, sondern dass alle partizipieren könnten, wenn sie es wollten" (Piontek 2017, 79).

mediated, and socially constructed" (Handley et al. 2006). Within this framework, practices take on a subtle and ambiguous form, as communities with shared interests work together towards commonly recognized goals. Wenger identifies several key components that characterize these communities, including concepts such as *meaning, identity, community*, and *practice* (2004, 211). Central to this notion is the role of participation in situated learning, as Lave and Wenger contend that identity and practices are shaped through engagement in communal activities. According to their perspective, learning is not confined to cognition but occurs within a participatory dynamics of a specific community, with diverse viewpoints mediating the learning process (Hanks 1991, 15). Participation extends beyond mere involvement in specific activities with particular individuals; it encompasses a broader engagement with the practices of social communities and the construction of identities within these contexts (Wenger 1998, 4). Thus, participation entails both action ('taking part') and connection, leading to the potential for mutual recognition and the negotiation of meaning (ibid., 55). This perspective is echoed by Felix Stalder, who employs the notion of communities of practice to illustrate not only epistemic behaviors but also their intertwining with the fabric of social existence (2018). When considering the museum visitor as a producer within this framework, we must also consider that individual action is defined through a collective routine and the encounter with the artwork is just one moment in a much longer series of constructive acts.

The theory of communities of practice, as elaborated by Wenger (1998), illustrates that individual practice is defined through a community, as "an integral part of our everyday lives" (1998, 6-7). Wenger extends this concept into a comprehensive framework that delineates how individuals and organizations collaborate within their respective practices. Fundamental to the formation of a community of practice are several key characteristics: the aggregation of individuals sharing common attributes (such as interests, skills, roles, and goals), the cultivation of a shared practice or set of practices, and the provision of a space, whether physical or virtual, enabling direct interaction among members, free from third-party mediation. Within these communities, members engage in a process of "joint enterprise" (1998, 81), characterized by a collective purpose and sense of identification with a particular topic or practice (Snyder et al. 2003), similar to the way an apprentice learns practice in a workshop.[37] These interests and

37 "Communities of practice are groups formed around a shared interest in which discussion builds on the values and motivations of their members" (O'Donnell et al. 2003, 83).

resulting common purposes are negotiated "communally" (Wenger 1998, 78). "Practice is, first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement within it as meaningful" (ibid., 51). Lave and Wenger further elucidate the dynamics of situated learning, examining how 'master practitioners' and 'newcomers' forge apprenticeship relationships facilitating the acquisition of practices within the community. Their model posits that novices initially inhabit the periphery of the community, engaging marginally while absorbing the practices of established members, eventually progressing to the status of masters and attaining full participation. However, recent scholarship, including Lave (2004), has challenged the dichotomy between 'periphery' and 'core/full' participation, suggesting that learning trajectories may not necessarily culminate in idealized full participation. Additionally, Wenger (1998) acknowledges diverse forms of participation, including marginal participation, recognizing that not all individuals aspire to full engagement. In the context of museums, the objective is not universal participation but rather universal access to participation for those interested (Piontek 2017, 79).[38] Museum scholar Léontine Meijer-van Mensch had already spoken of 'community of passion,' imagining communities that—united by a shared interest in a structure, a theme, specific objects, or their commitment to a common cause—engage in conversations with the institution.

Discussion and further steps

Within the complex revision processes that museums have been engaged in for decades, participation has been recognized as an ideal solution to re-establish a significant connection with the public. However, the indiscriminate use of the term has emptied the concept of its meaning, thereby complicating both the formulation of a shared definition of these practices and engagement in critical discourse. Presently, participation in museums primarily serves as a means of placation to satisfy public demands—a model emphasizing harmony and consensus—aimed at bestowing renewed legitimacy upon museums amidst a landscape marked by escalating competition within the leisure and knowledge sectors. Participation is not understood as a methodological approach but rather as a practice largely confined to educational departments, taking shape through scaffolded activities.

The majority of specialized literature on museum participation predominantly focuses on safeguarding institutional interests, aiming

38 "Das Ziel wäre dementsprechend nicht, dass alle am Museum partizipieren, sondern dass alle partizipieren könnten, wenn sie es wollten" (Piontek 2017, 79).

to increase visitor numbers and enhance external relevance through the sharing of specific case studies and implemented formats. In contrast, this chapter endeavors to underscore the critical and transformative potential inherent in the concept of participation. When the museum initiates an exchange, negotiation becomes necessary for both parties regarding methods, content, and modes. The insights of scholars presented in the preceding paragraphs contribute to a deeper understanding of this issue, emphasizing a participatory approach aimed at establishing enduring platforms for diverse voices and at redefining the institution itself through engagement with the public.

To hinder the success of these processes, there is a persistent mismatch between the applied museum scope and academic discourse. Despite museums having moved away from an approach predominantly focused on an anonymous public, only a few actively strive to cultivate communities with whom to initiate and forge connections. In the next chapter, I explore how a critically informed understanding of participation is adopted and integrated in the processes of a selection of contemporary institutions.

Chapter 2
PARTICIPATION IN ACTION: BEST PRACTICES

Introduction

In the spring of 2022, the Masterlehrgang für Ausstellungstheorie &-praxis at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna organized the symposium titled "How can the critique of the museum have consequences in the museum? Institutions for a different future." The conference title concisely encapsulates the core issue: Despite the attempts to address and discuss the problematics, they frequently lack tangible effects on the daily activities of museums.

The museum field struggles with bridging the gap between theoretical research and practical application. On one hand, theories developed within museum studies furnish valuable conceptual frameworks for comprehending and assessing museum practices. However, these theoretical constructs frequently lack direct practical application or an understanding of the specific constraints and needs of museums in real-world contexts. This discrepancy often results in a disconnection between the theoretical concepts proposed by academics and their application in the operation of museums. Museum professionals frequently express profound critiques regarding the detachment and abstract nature of reflections advanced by theorists, which appear divorced from the exigencies of everyday practical requirements (Murphy 2018). Concurrently, practice is relegated to a subordinate role, perpetually reliant on theoretical validation for legitimacy. During the Vienna symposium, Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, emphasized how "theory fundamentally informs museums. Practice is impossible without theory because it needs the legitimation that theory gives in order to practice" (Ausstellungstheorie Praxis 2021, 40:00). This lasting gap underscores the urgent need for greater synergy between academic discourse and museum operations.

Over the course of this PhD research, I visited and discussed the activities of multiple institutions and their specific approaches. This engagement involved museum experts from both professional and academic domains, including directors, curators, public program experts, researchers, and designers. Through their insights, ongoing transformations in the three traditional pillars of the museum mandate —exhibition, collection, and public program—were explored and traced. Particular emphasis was placed on how these areas are being reconfigured and reassessed. Most interventions targeted specific

departments or functions within the institution, encompassing alternative models in education and learning, the critical application of digital technologies, innovative approaches to acquisition, and the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries. The outcomes of these processes prompted reflection on established practices. While these formats currently represent informal experimental endeavors, they lay the groundwork for implementing more flexible and dialogic approaches between museums and audiences based on these precedents.

As articulated in the thesis introduction, the dialogue primarily engaged medium- to small-sized institutions that drive contemporary discourse through practices spanning architecture, design, contemporary art, and e-culture. Other museum typologies, including ethnographic, sectoral, or science museums, were not considered. This decision was based on their largely established provisional solutions for public engagement, as demonstrated by earlier examples, or because their approach to participation predominantly emphasized physical interaction. Furthermore, large institutions were not included in the study due to the complexity of influencing their dynamics, especially within the limited timeframes available for research.

The selected institutions were predominantly located in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. This decision was motivated by the intention to juxtapose contexts characterized by diverse social backgrounds and museum traditions. These interactions are documented through a selection of interviews included in the thesis appendix.

The following analysis focuses on the experiences of four specific institutions: the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, the Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI) and the Kunstinstituut Melly, both located in Rotterdam. The choice was prompted by the demonstrated capacity of these institutions to enact innovative decisions and formulate initiatives that fundamentally challenge traditional approaches to exhibition, collection, and curation. These endeavors prioritize the facilitation of dialogue with different audiences and the cultivation of a committed community. Their practices span various domains, including design, art, and architecture, underscoring processes that transcend disciplinary boundaries and have the potential to engage the museum community in a broader sense. Significantly, all four selected institutions identify themselves as *centers* or *institutes*, signaling an inherent ambition toward a more inclusive mandate and approach.

Furthermore, the study explores the role of designers in conceptualizing, facilitating, and shaping participatory activities within these contexts—an aspect that will be further elaborated on in the next chapter. While designers may not always be formally integrated into these institutions, they nonetheless extensively contribute to, or critique, the design practices inherent within them. The involvement of designers often proves invaluable to the success of the described processes, as they serve as mediators between theory and practice, bridging the gap between conceptual frameworks with tangible outcomes.

2.1. *CCA: Unsettled by Design*

The Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) is a museum and research center focused on contemporary architecture based in Montreal. Established by architect Phyllis Lambert in the late 1970s, the center has evolved over the past two decades, transitioning from a primarily local and historical focus to emerge as a leading voice in the global disciplinary discourse. The CCA's endeavors are marked by an ongoing interrogation of its own institutional mandate, embodying a self-reflective and anti-establishment approach to museum practice. This involves exploring diverse formats and mediums to redefine the institution's methodologies. Architectural theorist Mirko Zardini led the center for over fifteen years (2005-2020). At the beginning of his tenure, he focused the institution's research on contemporary content. He did so with a critical approach to practice itself because discussing various issues from his point of view made it impossible to propose architecture "as the solution to problems, as it was part of the problem" (Appendix: 224). A decision, which emerged in conversations with Zardini himself, that on several occasions has generated profound conflicts, both internally and with external partners and the public. However, this critical attitude at the CCA is not an end in itself but aims to generate knowledge differently. The museum does not offer answers but negotiates temporary solutions with its public according to specific situations and questions. Former staff member Lev Bratishenko characterizes this approach as intentionally fostering an environment of uncertainty: "by design an unsettled institution, always asking ourselves what kind of institution we want to be, which means being OK with being uncomfortable." (Appendix: 237). The decision to replace educational programs with the activation of conversations is consistent with this vision. At CCA "(t)here are no longer programmes that educate different audiences about architecture, but conversations are activated. (...) the institution is responsible for initiating a discourse, but the ways in which this discourse is developed are dialogic and experimental, not so much educational. I wanted to avoid providing already defined formats and contents with respect to the audience" (Appendix: Zardini, 230).

In an effort to enhance inclusivity and accessibility, the CCA underwent a significant transformation in 2016, reconceptualization its *Educational Services* department as the new *Public* program. Departing from the conventional perspective of unidirectional educational directives centered solely on architecture, the CCA team sought to create a closer connection both with other museum formats and with a diverse audience, testing ideas, beliefs, and contradictions. Lev Bratischenko, who served as program manager from 2016 to 2023, elucidated an approach characterized by the deliberate introduction of *obstructions* in addressing issues. The adoption of unconventional and non-prescriptive formats was embraced as a method to disrupt established norms and aspects of our collective existence, thereby involving new and more expansive segments of the public. Bratischenko argues that "(...) a lot of people are kept out of certain discussions by the very serious tone adopted by museums. Many people, consciously or unconsciously, refuse to take part in specific discussions because of the tone used. I think a lot of discussions are really designed to reproduce the authority of certain powerful figures and in this way they keep people out" (Appendix: 239). Utilizing such formats has emerged as a central strategy for delving into intricate societal issues, fostering stronger trust and rapport with audiences.

Over the years, the CCA has endeavored to integrate ongoing external discussions into its own discourse, subjecting them to critical examination. As Zardini elucidates, the methods for cultivating these dialogues are diverse and experimental, encompassing workshops, discussion sessions, immersive engagements via the public program, as well as research endeavors and publications. Various themes, including the energy crisis, migratory trends, and community involvement in urban transformations, have been explored over time (Appendix: 223).

The CCA does not have a design department within the institution itself. It establishes an exchange with designers it collaborates with each time, involving them from the earliest stages of the projects. In this way, designers do not merely offer a service but introduce different processes in the way of thinking and designing experiences, actively contributing to shaping the final outcomes. During our conversation, Bratischenko recognized the peculiarity and value of this mode of operation: "at CCA we engage designers as partners in the early stages of exhibition and book development. Unlike at other large museums, where projects are often completed before being handed over to institutional designers, at CCA we try to establish content conversations from the beginning" (Appendix: 236). The recognition of the value derived from continuous dialogue

is reflected in the outcomes produced by the CCA, where the result is not simply aesthetically pleasing but actually represents the result of an ongoing dialogue among the parties involved, making the individual contribution indistinguishable in each of them.

The publication *The Museum Is Not Enough* (Borasi et al. 2019) can be addressed as another seminal example of the CCA practice. Released in autumn 2019, the book traces and shares the ideas and methodologies of the museum through a first-person narrative. Right from the title, the intention to question the very mandate of the institution is made clear. The museum is called upon to interrogate its own role, where the exhibition and educational mandate is renegotiated and no longer at the center of the mission. The CCA instead offers itself as a learning partner. This quote from the publication: "I think I still have so much to learn that I don't think I can actually teach anyone else" (Borasi et al. 2019, 139). The CCA tries not to repeat the model of the museum as an educator; on the contrary, the pedagogical mission is abandoned, and it is looking for collaborators: "I want to share my questions and doubts, to invite others to range on my field or research. I want to provoke conversation" (ibid.). The museum initiates discourses and seeks partners willing to contribute to them. For Zardini and his team, "an exhibition is never a goal in itself, a publication is never a goal in itself. Our goal is to build a new discourse" (Appendix: 229).

In this way, escaping the explanatory logic of the traditional pedagogical mandate, the museum creates contexts using and sharing its knowledge and heritage differently. Factual knowledge is not placed at the center of the communicative exchange with the public. Instead of spreading a message, the CCA tries to create situations where "anyone who comes to visit or gets in touch (...) becomes a potential agent for transformation. This means not defining the end, but instead establishing different conditions for beginning" (Borasi et al. 2019, 140). Consequently, the museum becomes more of a listener and enabler, trying to identify different communities and establishing fields of discursive practice as part of culture as a whole. Public activation extends beyond the exhibition space, culminating in individuals who are critically thinking and socially aware (Appendix: Parry, 310).

To enhance interaction with a geographically diverse audience, digital technology has been adopted as a strategic tool, following critical reflection on its functionalities and potential. Instead of reducing digitization and online accessibility to a technical operation, the CCA has leveraged these processes for the production of new ideas. The museum team, together with appointed designers, engaged in a radical reflection on the potential of digital tools, leading to the conception of

the website[1] as a building for a new parallel and complementary institution. At its core was the desire to develop "a critical institutional tool for challenging some of the established divisions inside the museum. We didn't want to share the exact same structure outside as we use inside" (Appendix: Bratishenko, 235). The museum's intention was rather to challenge some of the institutional structures to expand and interrogate its mandate. "When we introduced digital technology at CCA, we imagined the institution to consist of two buildings (...) which partly overlapped and partly did not. A physical building, in which certain activities, research and productions were carried out and accessed by a certain type of audience. And a second digital building, in which part of those discourses were developed, but in different ways and in dialogue with an audience on a global scale" (Appendix: Zardini, 225). The second building is designed to offer the possibility of a broader conversation "in order to create internal conflict, and a productive friction. One of the risks of the institution is to stabilize itself around a permanent idea. The constant friction between the online and the physical inevitably allowed the institution to move forward." (Appendix: 225).

The next step was to integrate all outcomes of collaboration directly into the digital archive page. In a single space, it is possible to consult materials and contributions from the research, collection, or activities of the CCA team, digitized archive materials, ongoing research, and contributions from the external network of collaborators.[2] This choice highlights the institution's dialogue with its audiences.

> This section of the site is user-oriented, to support both research and discovery, with the possibility of building a personal selection to support individual research and curatorial projects. We have tried to develop research work that exploits this kind of second building: in this way a researcher has the opportunity to work with us online, and we can develop relationships with curators to build a network that is physical and active in the second building. Thus, the use of digital forms becomes not only a platform for transmission or publication but also a way of producing content through the geographically dispersed network of people collaborating with the CCA. (Appendix: Zardini, 226)

To incorporate a more inclusive and decolonial perspective into its processes, the museum team has also developed the *CCA c/o* format.

1 The site, launched in 2016, was designed with Principal (Montreal) and Studio Lin (NY).
2 "Collection": https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/about-collection

The underlying idea of the initiative was to create multiple satellites of the institution in locations far from its physical headquarters. As emerged in conversations with Zardini, the interest was in gathering and engaging with "different ideas and perspectives emerging from different cultures and places" (Canadian Center for Architecture).[3] These satellites were intended to serve as research platforms for engaging with cultural contexts distant from the museum's own. The project began as an attempt to explore knowledge outside the museum, regardless of its origin. It was conceived as a series of temporary initiatives developed in collaboration with partners in various locations worldwide. These collaborators include not only museums or institutions but also independent curators, architects, journalists, photographers, and publishers. "We have little interest in the physical infrastructure and subservient relationship of museum franchises or satellites. Today, a global institution must be thought of as a network, not a building. Agile and informal, CCA c/o sets down where an interesting architectural discussion is taking place and where a sympathetic partner can offer a unique perspective" (ibid.). Through this multiplicity of perspectives and practices, these collaborations focus on, share, and discuss topics relevant to a much broader audience than the one defined solely by the museum. As Zardini himself pointed out,

> the *CCA c/o* project were attempts to start a process of transforming the culture of the institution by exposing it to very different cultures. (...) CCA c/o was certainly an attempt to establish relationships, but it was primarily an attempt to use these external energies to challenge the institutional culture of the institution itself, in order to make it more adequate. (...) the institution faced with these situations could only listen, could only respond to a dialogue that started from other assumptions. These new extensions helped to enrich the research, curatorial and editorial work that underpinned CCA's activities. (Appendix: 231)

In this way, the CCA initiates a reflection that allows the institution to transcend its mere physical presence in the architectural building and reach audiences wherever relevant discussions actually occur.

The various projects initiated by the CCA, involving different audience groups, converge in reflecting on the present moment, on "the rules that we live with," and "alternative roles for our institutions" (Appendix: Zardini, 231). Conscious of the ethical and civic responsibility

3 "Conversations, from other perspectives": https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/cca-c-o/index

of the museum's mandate towards the urgent issues of contemporary societies, the museum team pursues a cultural revolution through its positioning, statements, and approach to issues. This also means developing new tools, attitudes, and types of research.

2.2. *HNI: Collecting Otherwise*

Established in 2013 as a result of a merger mandated by the Dutch government, comprising three other institutions—the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), the Premsela Institute for Design and Fashion, and the Virtual Platform, an institute for e-culture knowledge—Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI) in Rotterdam has adopted a vision and approach that differ from those of the previous sectoral institutions. By proposing a working method that transcends individual disciplines, the institute explores and develops collective working methods, moving beyond the exhibition and educational tasks to offer itself as an instrument for societal inquiry and support. The museum critically interrogates the fields of design, e-culture, and fashion, but unlike in the past, the focus is not on the museumified representation of one or more leading figures in various disciplinary fields but on the development and interrogation of urgent social issues. This choice provides cohesion to a field typically organized mostly in a disciplinary manner and deliberately emphasizes interdisciplinary knowledge development.

Since its foundation, HNI has engaged in a dialectic where the speculative space of the institute enters into dialogue with the complexity of the external society to create connections and address urgent inquiries. From the exploitation of ecological resources to alternative models for post-human institutions, from disruptive changes in labor ethos and conditions to the recognition of the failure of grand narratives, the critical issues of the present become research material for the institution and material for dialogue with the public. For the institute members, the research activity is not limited to functional study for the development of exhibitions but seeks "to foster long-term thinking and iterative processes rather than perpetuating short-term production cycles" within the museum (Appendix: Otero-Verzier, 243). This approach reconsiders the exhibition as just one of several mediums for facilitating discourse, creating room for dialogue, and fostering critical inquiry. The educational mission has been reconceptualized to embrace a stance that values curiosity, critical thinking, and dialogue.

HNI rediscovers new potential each time by testing an interdisciplinary approach with the public: in this way, it can temporarily be transformed into a design archive or an academy for post-human knowledge, or a fashion museum. In the winter of 2019, for example, the museum hosted the *Speculative Design Archive* exhibition. Starting from the observation of the lack of an organized approach to archives in the design and digital culture sectors in the Netherlands—materials are mostly distributed among studios, museums, archives, and private collections—the museum wanted to collectively find an answer to the question of what to preserve for future generations. The museum's halls were thus transformed for five months (19.10.2018–10.03.2019) into a temporary archive installation. The goal was to collectively develop shared parameters: the materials from the design and e-culture archive—significant works, prototypes, sketches, material samples, color schemes—were displayed in the exhibition space, and through an installation that followed all the stages of an archiving process—collecting, storing, arranging, and describing items, reconstructing their origins,—visitors could witness and take part in the processes of determining their value and significance.

While primarily targeting a specialized and sectoral audience referring to the museum's areas of expertise, HNI is committed to including diverse audiences in its activities, modulating them in a differentiated manner. In particular, in recent years, the museum has focused on perspectives that have long been marginalized or obscured by rethinking the research and acquisition work of its archive. In 2016, the initiation of digitization processes highlighted the thematic and methodological gaps in the official historiography collected up to that point. The National Collection of Dutch Architecture and Urbanism placed univocal emphasis on Western white male architects as part of the establishment. The research department, inaugurated alongside the Instituut's founding and led by Marina Otero Verzier (2015–2022), embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at challenging the foundational principles that had previously underpinned the collection's development and management. In particular, the *Collecting Otherwise* project undertook methodological development work to read the collection through different perspectives and to integrate new contributions. The issue of the cultural diversity of the collection has instigated new perspectives regarding the reading and new acquisitions of the archive. These initiatives have focused on informal architectural practices that did not fit into the museum's acquisition policy, such as feminism in architecture; queer perspectives; the architectural heritage of former Dutch colonies and their aftermath; or collective, precarious, and even criminalized spatial practices like squatting. "Collecting Otherwise thus passes through habilitating (ex)colonial peripheries and bodies to collect for themselves, according to their own interests and needs. This needs to

happen in a situated and re-situated way" (Het Nieuwe Instituut).[4] These new processes have meant, for example, the working group making the archives and research available for consultation, use, and retrieval by the respective communities. The challenge has been to sustainably connect these people to the collections held by the institution—often written in Dutch—while the museum endeavors to establish a position of mutual learning. These activities have necessitated a retooling process by the museum, entailing a reconsideration of the tools, methods, and procedures for conducting research. One among these new processes is the utilization of the *Asterisk* symbol,[5] which enables the recontextualization and presentation of alternative interpretations of previously categorized materials. The adoption of the symbol involves appending new captions to the existing ones, which are often generic or incomplete. Consequently, archived materials undergo a process of re-signification through this renewed classification. The introduction of this tool enhances the contextualization, social relevance, and accessibility of the collection, making it representative of the diverse narratives encapsulated within the archive. In conversation with the project leader, Setareh Noorani (Appendix: 252), it became evident that what might seem "the best way possible" to collect from a Western perspective often proves to be illogical for the needs of other contexts and cultures, particularly when dealing with informal practices such as conversations, oral traditions, or collective drawing. This has meant making room for other archival practices, understanding how these can intersect and operate with pre-existing institutional practices and archives. Local communities have been involved in the development of these projects, having freedom and autonomy in defining the content and methods of work.

> By doing these hands-on projects, we also come across certain gaps. Both in knowledge and in accessibility. It's never possible to completely fill an entire gap. I think it's both about making certain bridges over these gaps and shifting perspective to actually see that there's not a gap at all. It's just something that we should perceive differently or have other ways, other tools, other particular methodologies to deal with an absence. (Appendix: Noorani, 252)

The working group placed a specific focus on adopting a wide array of new tools and emphasizing the process to promote transparent

4 "Post/De/Colonial": https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/events/gathering-5-postdecolonial
5 "Asterisk*": https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/projects/collecting-otherwise/asterisk

decision-making, effectively fostering an environment that welcomes a diversity of voices and perspectives.

The team, which involves both museum members and an extensive external network, consists of an intersectional, international, and multidisciplinary working group in continuous growth, whose backgrounds range from artistic to academic. Participants work using a work-in-progress method: research processes are documented and shared in a publicly accessible document online that anyone can consult.[6] The purpose of this webpage is not only to preserve the memory of the project, but also to highlight and share processes that are often invisible within museums, yet crucial in shaping narratives through institutional choices.

These initiatives initially emerged at the periphery of the archive, conceived as temporary and experimental research projects. They frequently faced resistance from the museum's collection curatorial staff, who perceived them as speculative and influenced by contemporary trends (Appendix: Otero-Verzier, 244). The objective of the Collecting Otherwise project is to integrate the insights collected from these experiences across the entirety of archival operations. The case studies that have been developed now serve as a blueprint for extending previous projects and integrating their methods into future acquisition practices within the Instituut's collections.

In 2023, the working group decided to formalize these processes by defining shared *Tool Sheds*. The term refers to a collection of methodological tools utilized by the team –but made accessible to others– for tackling pertinent issues. "We offer our own tools, but we also leave the metaphorical doors of the Tool Shed open for others outside the Nieuwe Instituut to contribute and share theirs" (Het Nieuwe Instituut).[7] The project seeks to serve as a hub to facilitate and cultivate collaborations and projects between diverse audiences and the research group at the institutional, drawing on and contributing to existing tools and methodologies or proposing others. "The Tool Shed aims to hold fluid, flexible, and multi-disciplinary research tools and methodologies for material, theoretical, political, time-based, or place-based sets of practices. It also facilitates their accessibility through acts of neighborly borrowing—between researchers, disciplines, and ambitions, and between the Nieuwe Instituut and various publics. A Tool Shed is not necessarily a neat and sufficient collection of instruments,

6 "Collecting Otherwise Etherpad": https://etherpad.enter.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/p/collecting_otherwise
7 "Call for Fellows 2023: Tool Sheds": https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/articles/call-for-fellows-tool-sheds

perfectly suited to their well-defined tasks; rather, it is a place to rummage around, to find unsought alternatives, to learn and mix skills" (ibid.).

Although these processes are not predictable, their inherent openness adds value to the institution itself, transforming it into an experimental platform for fostering exchange and dialogue with its communities. While "a lot of work within academia is focused on the finished result, (...) we really try to build up a network and then, through various media, show what we are doing continuously" (Appendix: Noorani, 253). This presupposes that one does not already know the answers one wants to obtain: "It becomes this adaptable process of people coming in, people going out, bringing their case studies, working on their own case studies and gathering knowledge together. They can take out of it what they want" (Appendix: 251). The museum thus becomes a porous platform for investigation and exchange where different publics can contribute their input.

The research conducted by HNI on its collection presents a perspective that is inclusive and egalitarian regarding the decision-making processes involved. While the museum's traditional role is that of a custodian preserving artifacts for the future, the selection of what is deemed significant is now being renegotiated with a much broader audience, extending beyond the museum's physical confines. The institution's responsibility evolves into guiding people through these processes, embracing methodologies, reflections, and materials that transcend Western traditions. These projects catalyze a profound transformation across multiple levels. They not only reinterpret and revitalize the institutional mandate of the archive, turning it into a dynamic entity open to reinterpretation and recontextualization, but also strive to make the perspectives through which these materials are viewed relevant to a wider audience, thus expanding the museum's significance to a broader public.

2.3. *HKW: Radical Hospitality*

In 2023, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin embarked on a journey to transform itself into an experimental laboratory dedicated to exploring strategies for communal living, aspiring to be "a home of multiplicity and international encounters" (Haus der Kulturen der Welt).[8] Exploring the concept of conviviality, the new artistic director Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and his team proposed to develop a project of radical hospitality through a range of different formats. In this endeavor, the Western perspective of the museum is challenged, embracing instead cultures, epistemologies, and ways of being that respond to non-Western traditions. The goal, as highlighted in conversation with the artistic director, is to create "spaces that care for everyone and their stories" (Appendix: Ndikung, 265) allowing for dissonance and friction to find space so that a real encounter can take place. In these processes, the involvement and diversity of audiences are central. The objective is to infuse the institutional space with the vibrancy of life beyond its walls, fostering connections between the interior and the exterior. Given Berlin's multiculturality, encompassing residents from over 170 different nations, the city serves as an ideal backdrop for hosting this platform to experiment with alternative museum practices.

Ndikung and his team employ a rigorous and multisensory approach, wherein the diverse cultures of the world are lived and experienced, rather than merely museumified and displayed. Through a practice of deep listening, such as through the *Exercises* format, diverse audiences are engaged in dialogue to gather voices and inputs, which are then discussed and integrated into the program.

The project carries with it the legacy built by artistic director Ndikung at S A V V Y Contemporary, an independent project space he founded in 2009 and directed until 2022, "an art space, discursive platform, eating and drinking spot, njangi house, space for conviviality" (S A V V Y).[9] The institution's commitment in that case, too, was focused on producing knowledge by welcoming and celebrating the knowledge and epistemic systems of different continents, opening up to non-Western perspectives and traditions. S A V V Y Contemporary stages "events of knowledge," preferring processes that embody and disseminate knowledge differently, such as through the body, music, storytelling, food, dance, theater, and performative art. In Ndikung's words, the center seeks to develop an "extra-disciplinary approach" to curatorial practices, based on the premise that "another knowledge is possible" (Ndikung 2017). There is no division or hierarchy among the proposed and developed activities: conviviality and social interaction are addressed alongside exhibition-making, research, archival studies, and publications. Knowledge is generated transcending markers of difference and predetermined identity positions, thereby blurring disciplinary boundaries. This approach fosters transcultural and interdisciplinary knowledge production aimed at addressing pressing contemporary issues such as colonialism, migration phenomena, integration processes, discrimination, racism, and cultural pluralization.

8 "About us": https://www.hkw.de/en/the-house/about/about#main

9 "Savvy Contemporary -The Laboratory Of Form-Ideas": https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/about/concept/

The adoption of a non-Western perspective in exhibition practices endeavors to renegotiate power dynamics, eschew fixed descriptions of minorities as essentialized identities, advocate for equality, and adopt a political stance by fostering solidarity alliances across existing divisions. According to Ndikung, this approach aims to sidestep objectification and racialization, integrate subjugated forms of knowledge, and explore collective practices that facilitate multiple avenues of access, engagement, and collaboration (Ndikung 2017).

To this end, every tool, method, and practice is explored and questioned in dialogue with the structure. The Design Department within S A V V Y emerged precisely from an interrogation regarding the Western and (neo-)colonial past of the discipline. Initiated in 2018 by Elsa Westreicher, a graphic designer working at the institution since 2014, the project was conceived as a long-term research project. The creation of such a space arose from the recognition of the need to decode and recode visual systems and their biases in order to uncover design stories, practices, and philosophies beyond the Euro-American canon (Appendix: Westreicher, 269). In addition to the center's communication, the department is thus concerned with creating dialogue formats and providing a public platform for discourse around design, to understand and share its inherited power structures while also exploring strategies of resistance. To achieve these research objectives, S A V V Y Contemporary has opened collaboration to researchers and designers interested in applying to work on these topics.

Drawing on theories formulated by theorists such as Mary Louise Pratt and Chantal Mouffe, Ndikung refers to exhibition spaces as *contact zones*, social spaces where people with different backgrounds meet, clash, and confront each other, often in places characterized by highly asymmetric power relations, such as colonialism, slavery, or their consequences as experienced in today's world. S A V V Y Contemporary allows this space for friction and disagreement in addressing social conflicts arising from the need to learn to coexist in contexts of socio-cultural diversity. By allowing the existence of culturally plural and conflictual spaces, S A V V Y renegotiates dissent and differences, allowing its participants to stage counter-hegemonic struggles and develop new forms of solidarity within the institution. The center also recognizes these as a form of knowledge production.

The attention to diverse audiences has necessitated adaptation of the ways in which activities are mediated. In addition to traditional guided tours—in Portuguese, Pidgin, French, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, in an attempt to create new inclusive entry points for gallery visitors who do not speak English or German—these tours were also announced as an opportunity to join the S A V V Y team "for insights, banter, and gossip" (S A V V Y).[10] An attempt to attract not only art connoisseurs but also new audiences looking for more informal, anecdotal, and humorous approaches. In this way, the project has managed to create a connection and engage in dialogue with multiple local communities. The center had initially opened a venue in the Neukölln district, characterized at the time by a prevalence of immigrant residents. In 2016, it then moved to Wedding, a multi-ethnic neighborhood. Through its inclusive and accessible programming, S A V V Y Contemporary has connected artists and scholars with local families and individuals in the neighborhood, creating an active and dialogical community. The cultural center has proven to be an important reference point for building communities in a multicultural society (Mgba, 2023).

In the case of HKW, the legacy of the practices developed at S A V V Y persisted, despite the inherent challenges of transitioning from an independent, self-managed entity to a state-run museum. At HKW, food also becomes a vehicle for knowledge and a space for dialogue: 'Tongue and Throat Memories' is a Cooking Sessions program initiated in 2023 and continuing until 2027. Food serves as a unifying element among guests of diverse origins, ages, and cultures, creating a space for the production, exchange, and transmission of knowledge. These moments are interpreted as starting points for meaningful encounters and dialogues, where cooking and sharing a meal become acts of solidarity and healing from the wounds of the past. Each invited chef in residence[11] creates a menu in dialogue with the public program through a shared narrative element, such as a film, performance, musical or literary event, or conversation. In November 2023, Chef Sean Sherman was a guest with the program 'Revitalizing Native American Cuisine,' which aims, for example, to preserve traditional cooking methods of Sioux communities and to increase understanding of food systems developed in ancestral lands before colonial domination.

At HKW, language also serves as a material for inquiry and research: The 'Sensing Worlds. South Epistemologies and Praxes' conversations are a program of collective reflections on the use of language to avoid perpetuating a colonial understanding of events. The effort to "shift the boundaries of language" represents a collective commitment to discover ways to express thoughts that may not find a voice in languages that, due to their hegemonic structure and hierarchical systems linked to

10 "Savvy Contemporary -The Laboratory Of Form-Ideas": https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/about/concept/

11 Among them: Chef Paul Toussaint (Taste of the Haitian Dish) and Chef Fatmata Binta (Dine on a Mat — A Taste from the Fulani Kitchen).

their forms of knowledge, fail to communicate certain philosophies and worldviews.

Similarly, the 'Theatre of Reconciliation' project involves monthly meetings on the theme of memory, understood as a matter of belonging and repair. In 2023, the series explored the theme guided by the motto 'it was,' to continue in 2024 with 'could have been,' before moving through the stages 'is' and 'will be,' to conclude with the future perfect 'will have been.' The reference to the use of verb tenses in the past, present, and future allows for the interrogation of phenomena on different temporal scales. It is a speculative exercise that allows audiences to intervene and experience different perspectives.

To open up to a multiplicity of voices and audiences consistently, the institution itself has undergone a process of revision in recent months. In Ndikung's words: "We want to dismantle this institution and rebuild it, using the same bricks. We find the bricks important, but the institution needs to be rethought" (Moroder 2023). This process of profound revision involved, between January and June 2023, a rethinking of the curatorial staff, communication, and visual identity, up to the use and renaming of the museum's architectural spaces. In a process of *resignifying* the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the spaces of the building were named after women who have positively marked world history but whose names do not find sufficient space in current historiography. For example, the auditorium was named after the South African singer Miriam Makeba, the terrace after the Martinican writer Paulette Nardal, the entrance after the Egyptian feminist activist Nawal El Saadawi, and so on. By renaming and resignifying the spaces of the entire museum, this site-specific installation is emblematic of the rethinking that has involved the Berlin institution. The process of reattributing a name has activated new meanings, consequently generating symbolically new spaces. Reflecting a similar ethos, the museum's curatorial team, comprising individuals from diverse nationalities and backgrounds, is listed on the website in alphabetical order. Adrian Pilling, *Beleuchtungsmeister*, is positioned at the top of the list, symbolizing the institution's endeavor to flatten its internal hierarchies.

To reflect these processes, Studio Yukiko, responsible for the museum's rebranding, has developed an identity project that allows the public to redefine its shape each time. The logo features the letters HKW in an organic form, breaking the initials into smaller modules where each letter is a separate element. The participatory aspect is digitally enhanced on the museum website by a filter with which the public can use sounds, gestures, and even facial expressions (eye movements are tracked and used as triggers) to form and reform the logo. The possibility to deconstruct the shape of the letters through gestures and sounds aims to challenge the textual dominance of the Western norm and to present the image of the art center as "a living, breathing, pulsating organism where knowledge is shared from a plurality of sources that is open and ever-expanding, rather than a static institution stuck within a top-down hierarchical structure" (Gorny 2023).

2.4. *Kunstinstituut Melly: Renaming to Reframing*

In January 2021, the institution formerly known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam was renamed the Kunstinstituut Melly. The renaming process, which lasted for five years, was triggered by an open letter addressed to the museum by a group of cultural operators who publicly contested the name in use. When the museum opened in 1990, it was decided to directly reference the street where the institution is located, Witte de Withstraat 50, which in turn is named after Admiral Witte Corneliszoon de With (1599-1658), a Dutch naval officer involved in colonial ventures.[12] The letter expressed concerns that operating under such a name would hinder the pursuit of social inclusivity, instead foregrounding a dissonant heritage and a value system competing with the cultural institution's commitment to contemporary debate through art. In light of a new historical awareness, the letter highlighted a blind spot in the museum's practice up to that point. The impact of this interrogation catalyzed a public debate informed by broader ongoing decolonization efforts in the Netherlands and was met with self-awareness by the museum.

Upon her arrival at the Witte de With in January 2018, the new artistic director, Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy, in agreement with the Supervisory Board,[13] initiated the *Name Change Initiative*.[14] The endeavor was part of a broader institutional review process desired by the museum to diversify both the reference community and perspectives on programs, prioritizing underrepresented research and stories. The director expressed the desire to make the institution "responsive and responsible," emphasizing that this goal is achieved primarily by changing the terms of engagement with contemporaneity (Hernández Cuy 2019). The renaming of the institute, a transformation intended to reflect and

12 From 1986 to 1989, the institution was referred to as *Kunsthuis* in all documents. Just a few months before its public opening in January 1990, it was renamed the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art.

13 Members of the Supervisory Board: Fariba Derakhshani, Timme Geerlof, Stijn Huijts, Annet Lekkerkerker (Chair), Gabriel Lester, Annuska Pronkhorst, Katarina Zdjelar.

14 In designing the Renaming Process, the institution was inspired by two institutional case-studies; Yale University's Hopper College, renamed from Calhoun College in 2017; and the music hall Bristol Beacon, renamed from Colston Hall in 2020. Both institutions undertook a name-change involving a research-based and years-long process.

respond to the social responsibility of the museum in relation to the changes of the present time, was informed both through international discussions and local debates.[15] The museum, represented by a diversified working team composed of intergenerational staff members with diverse skills, knowledge, and perspectives on the institution's structure and the field of art, led the processes by pursuing a philosophy of *collective learning* in close collaboration with an established network of stakeholders. 280 external participants, both from the city of Rotterdam and internationally, were also involved.

The process, unfolding from January 2018 to the conclusive announcement in September 2020, unfolded through several phases. It commenced with the invitation of audiences to partake in an online survey, followed by deliberations held across five forums. During this period, an external Advisory Committee comprising 13 members was established. This Committee oversaw a Public Review process conducted in three sessions, culminating in the identification of a shortlist of potential new names for the museum.[16] The ultimate decision, arrived at by the director and Supervisory Board, was informed by the report furnished by the external Advisory Committee and the outcomes of the Public Review and Public Input processes, leading to the selection of Kunstinstituut Melly as the new name. According to Annet Lekkerkerker, the chairperson of the institution's Supervisory Board, "Our new name (...) has been created with the input of many, both inside and outside our institution. (...) The new name embodies a process of collective learning that has become central to the mission of Kunstinstituut Melly" (Kunstinstituut Melly 2020)[17].

The name was inspired by the artwork "Melly Shum Hates Her Job" by Canadian artist Ken Lum and has been installed on the building's façade since 1990. Over time, the artwork, installed at the public's request, has become a local icon. "What was important for me was that the new name would not only be one that holds the institution accountable but also shows that it wants to interact with the neighborhood it is in. Choosing Melly, that has a long history locally, promises that the institution wants to be connected and have a dialogue with the city,"

15 Director Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy says that, "the institution's renaming responds to the claims raised by the larger decolonial movement in such a way that the new name, even by evocation, cannot disregard this moment. In this sense, our ongoing project Melly has come to stand for a work culture that fosters public engagement, deep listening, and collective learning" (Source: http://change.wdw.nl/reports-media/report12/).

16 All steps can be followed through the online reports: http://change.wdw.nl/reports-media. Furthermore, they have been critically reflected upon in the publication: Hernández Chong Cuy, Sofía, Rosa de Graaf, Jessy Koeiman, Jeroen Lavèn, and Vivian Ziherl (eds.). 2022. *Tools for Collective Learning.* Prinsenbeek, Rotterdam: Jap Sam Books, Kunstinstituut Melly.

17 "Press Report": http://change.wdw.nl/reports-media/report12/

(ibid.) said Yahaira Brito Morfe, Arts Producer, Work Learn Program participant 2019-2020, and Advisory Committee Member.

The Name Change Initiative exerted a profound influence on the institution's organization, reshaping its artistic vision, programmatic focus, and strategies for engaging with the public. Notably, among the initiatives that significantly impacted the latter aspect was the transformation of the ground-floor gallery from a conventional white cube into a dynamic hybrid space for art and events in May 2018. This adaptive shift aimed to cultivate a welcoming environment for new audiences and introduced a specialized work/study program tailored for young residents of Rotterdam. The revamped space, envisioned as a multifunctional hub for collective learning, operates under an ethos of accessibility, striving to foster civic engagement through visual arts. Witte de With's director, Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, explains how the process of working with program participants made it evident: "a common interest in fostering social inclusion, developing collaborative creations, and establishing innovative partnerships that are meaningful locally and globally relevant" (Kunstinstituut Melly 2020)[18].

Discussion and further steps

The experiences of the museums presented in these pages—and those that can be further explored in the interviews in the appendix of this thesis—represent the beginning of a multifold and ever-growing mapping. It is important to emphasize the type of knowledge that these experiences give rise to: tracing and analyzing these case studies highlights the transformation underway in traditional museum structures towards more horizontal methods of exchange and negotiation with the public in various aspects. These are solutions that deploy a different potential in each of the traditional mandates of the institution, from exhibitions to archives, to public programs, and even in their interpretation of the adoption and use of digital tools. There is a clear shift in the role and mandate of the institution, which no longer simply operates as an attractor and educator for its audiences but rather positions itself as an activator for dialogue and exchange through a multitude of formats. The museum becomes a partner in processes that negotiate and even generate new knowledge through collaborative efforts.

These initiatives reverberate within the very structures of the museums themselves: they not only manifest in the exhibited content and the curatorial decisions underpinning their presentation but also in the revitalized methodologies that underlie these outcomes, in the

18 "Press Report": http://change.wdw.nl/reports-media/report12/

procedural shifts, and in the modes of engaging with the public. Furthermore, the experiences spotlighted herein underscore the efficacy of cultivating and nurturing communities of practice around the disciplinary realms and discourses activated within and by the museums.

However, several critical aspects warrant further investigation. One such area of inquiry pertains to the nature of public participation. While in some instances, the framework and collaboration resemble that of a cohesive community of practice, at other times, contributions seem akin to individual dialogues with isolated individuals. The mechanisms, through which these communities coalesce and organize, remain nebulous. Furthermore, these endeavors often unfold within constrained timeframes, with enduring relationships with institutions rarely solidified. Additionally, these communities primarily function on an invitation-only basis. It begs the question whether it's possible to devise a method whereby this avenue of dialogue can be accessible under different premises.

Directly connected to this point is the fact that so far the demand for change in museums has mainly been directed towards what is visible from the outside, while the traditional structure of museums has remained unchanged. The way museums operate remains largely hidden from anyone who does not work inside the institutions. Rethinking and mobilizing the structure could, however, create new spaces for establishing ongoing relationships with public communities.[19]

Finally, another aspect to be explored in the subsequent chapter is the potential role of design in these processes, which requires a reevaluation. Currently, design's involvement remains peripheral, with limited instances where it actively contributes to these endeavors, mostly from a functional standpoint. Nonetheless, the mismatch between theoretical discourse and practical application underscores the untapped potential that the discipline of design holds for the processes examined in this study.

19 In this regard, it is worth mentioning the experience of Casco Art Institute in Utrecht. They have dedicated themselves to becoming an exemplary site for unlearning processes, focusing on how organizational entities can cease to learn systematic ways of oppression and adopt different habits. The staff has questioned the role and implicit authority of the museum as an institution in our society in order to assess and modify institutional power dynamics. These processes have been documented and shared in the publication: Binna Choi, Annette Krauss, Yolande van der Heide, Liz Allan (eds.). 2018. *Unlearning Exercises. Art Organizations as Sites for Unlearning.* Amsterdam: Valiz.

Chapter 3
RETHINKING THE DESIGN MANDATE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM

Introduction

Presently, the field of design is characterized by a multitude of definitions, mirroring its diverse and evolving nature. While its roots are firmly entrenched in industrial production and mass communication, the professional and disciplinary landscape of design has undergone ongoing efforts to systematize and define itself clearly. These endeavors, aimed at securing recognition and legitimacy within society and culture, have not, however, resulted in the crystallization of design practices and theories into a singular form. Instead, the various labels that have emerged over time underscore what scholar Richard Buchanan termed the "pluralism of design" (2001). This term encapsulates the fragmented and multiple nature of the approaches, methodologies, theories, and practices encompassed by the term *design*. Buchanan notes how this pluralism has been present "since the earliest days of design practice" (2001, 197).

The notion of pluralism suggests that design, in its broadest sense, can manifest in diverse applications and draw upon various methodologies, contingent upon the contexts and purposes for which it is employed. Consequently, the contemporary design landscape witnesses ongoing expansion, spurred by intersections with other disciplinary domains and in response to discourses emanating from new socio-political, postcolonial, and ecological perspectives (Bardzell et al. 2018; Christensen and Conradi 2020; Fisher and Gamman 2019; Fry 2020; Dunne and Raby 2013; Lorusso 2023; Malpass 2017; Manzini 2015; Mareis and Paim 2021; Mareis et al. 2022; Nocek and Fry 2021; Tharp and Tharp 2019; Thierfelder 2014). These dynamics propel design towards a more inclusive definition, underscoring its role as a social practice with both symbolic and functional significance. However, this legacy often struggles for recognition, both from external users inundated by the plethora of definitions and from practitioners themselves, who may feel ill-equipped, uneducated, or uncomfortable to delineate or transcend the specificity of their work (Norman 2010).

Exploring the role and implementation of design within participatory practices in museums reveals a wealth of resources, including papers, websites, and symposia. These materials offer a diverse array of approaches, perspectives, and tools, shedding light on designers' stances on the subject. Yet, there is a notable scarcity of texts that

explicitly frame the role of design in museums, and even fewer offer a critical perspective. Furthermore, a persistent gap persists between theoretical disciplinary discourse and the practical application of these insights. Presently, museums predominantly view design as a modernist and functional discipline, a temporary practice or tool employed to address specific problems and achieve desired outcomes.

In this chapter, I propose integrating a speculative and agonistic perspective (DiSalvo 2012 and 2014) into the current framework of service design within museums. Rather than framing the role of designers solely in terms of problem-solving, I advocate for a shift towards "problem-posing" (Blauvelt and Davis 1997), "problem-setting" (Schön 1983), or "problem-finding" (Mazé 2009). This redefinition embeds their disciplinary intervention within a broader systemic context. Critical design, in relation to a given problem, does not follow a linear progression from problem to solution but instead involves continuous articulation of the problem itself (Buchanan 1997). Through the design project, the conditions that constitute the problem, the involved actors and processes, and even the role played by design in defining the problem emerge and are shared.

Drawing upon the insights of scholars and practitioners such as Richard Buchanan (1985, 1992, 1997, and 2001), Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2007), Jacques Rancière (2000, 2004), Sabine Junginger (2009, 2015), and Carl DiSalvo (2012, 2014), this chapter introduces and discusses lines of thought that converge on a different vision of the role and mandate of design. In this reconfiguration, methodologies and projects transcend the assumptions of the modernist tradition and adopt an adversarial and speculative perspective. Design is no longer viewed solely as an applied science for solving specific problems, but as a cultural practice deeply influenced by social, political, economic, and ideological conditions. From this perspective, critical activity is practiced through the project, which is seen as a form of inquiry (Buchanan 1992). Design becomes a tool to experience and generate knowledge beyond the confines of the discipline, instigating change in the prevailing state of affairs.

The critical dimension of this approach lies in deconstructing hegemonic representations, offering users access and space for reflection and confrontation regarding the meaning of these representations and ultimately the image of reality they produce. This process could greatly benefit museums amidst their prolonged redefinition processes.

3.1. *Design for Museums*

In 2010, Nina Simon, a US museum director with a background in exhibition design, published *The Participatory Museum*. This seminal work swiftly made a profound impact on the museum community and has since served as a guiding light for numerous institutions seeking to incorporate participatory activities with their audiences over the past decade. Simon's book effectively bridged a longstanding gap between academic discourse and practical application (Murphy 2018), illuminating the participatory potential within museums as a response to the prevailing crisis (Simon 2010, ii). Drawing upon contemporary case studies, Simon meticulously articulated her analysis, offering detailed guidelines for cultural institutions to craft "valuable and compelling" participatory experiences (ibid.,1). In doing so, she formalized a series of ongoing practices and phenomena—primarily observed in North American museums at the time[1]—that constituted a burgeoning trend poised for expansion over the ensuing two decades.[2] Despite previous scholarly acknowledgments of the imperative for increased dialogue and interaction between institutions and visitors (Adams 1995; Dierking and Falk 1992; Gurian 2005; Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Weil 2008), Simon brought specific attention to the active involvement of the public, explicitly referencing the term *participation* from a practical perspective.

In her book, Simon assigns design a central role in addressing these dynamics, introducing a design perspective to the discourse on participation. From the outset, it is underscored as "a question of design" (2010, 1).[3] Simon stresses the significance of integrating designers' expertise into museums to shape desired experiences and cater to the needs of all stakeholders involved.[4] The objective is not merely to amplify the voices and agency of the public but also to negotiate a balance that considers the desires and requirements of other museum visitors and the institution itself.[5] Consequently, the author advocates for

1 The proposal is grounded in the specific dynamics of the US context, marked by the prevalent presence of private governance. Here, the emphasis on performance becomes paramount to ensure the financial viability and commercial efficacy of institutions. However, in recent decades, Europe has also witnessed a discernible rise in private engagement in museum management and funding. This shift reflects the evolving landscape shaped by ideological transformations stemming from neoliberal policies.

2 "I believe the majority of museums will integrate participatory experiences as one of many types of experiences available to visitors in the next twenty years" (Simon 2010, 6).

3 "How can cultural institutions use participatory techniques not just to give visitors a voice, but to develop experiences that are more valuable and compelling for everyone? This is not a question of intention or desire; it's a question of design." (Simon 2010, 1).

4 "Participatory projects aren't just about empowering visitors. Every participatory project has three core stakeholders: the institution, participants, and the audience. The audience may mean the institution's visitors, but it can also include other constituencies who might have a particular interest in the outcomes of the project-for example, participants' neighbours or associates. For a project to be successful, the project staff should be able to articulate and satisfy the interests of each group" (Simon 2010, 13).

5 "Outcomes of participation may be as diverse as the goals of the institution overall. These outcomes include: to attract new audiences, to collect and preserve visitor-contributed content, to provide educational experiences for visitors, to produce appealing marketing

the implementation of experiences that are not entirely open-ended but rather operate within a scaffolded framework, thereby facilitating public intervention and involvement.[6] These proposals must be executable during visits and capable of yielding tangible outcomes. This necessitates the prior definition of objectives and the contextualization of activities, all while manifesting the museum's agenda regarding the topic and the utilization of collected contributions. In these processes, the role of design—encompassing tools and techniques intrinsic to the discipline—[7] lies in crafting effective and accessible experiences, as well as aesthetically enhancing contributions developed by a non-professional audience.[8]

In delineating her proposal, Simon not only scrutinizes museum case studies but also incorporates references to for-profit ventures, particularly focusing on the model of digital participation. The book was published during the peak of social media popularity in the early 2010s, and Simon identifies their operation as a successful benchmark for user engagement—a model ripe for examination and implementation within museum settings. Simon underscores the significance of creating dedicated spaces for sharing experiences, highlighting the importance of experimentation, learning from outcomes, and continuously adapting museum practices in response to audience dynamics. For instance, she lauds Nike+[9] for connecting audiences through shared interests and references experiences from Netflix, Facebook, and LinkedIn to illustrate the understanding and response to individual preferences in crafting personalized itineraries based on visitors' specific tastes and interests. Moreover, Simon highlights the importance of providing users with the opportunity to rate and comment on their experiences, thereby influencing the choices of subsequent visitors.

The analysis of these examples enabled Simon to categorize participating audiences based on their expectations and varied modes

campaigns, to display locally-relevant exhibitions, and to become a town square for conversation" (Simon 2010, 16) / "work should be useful to the institution".

6 "The best participatory experiences are not wide open. They are scaffolded to help people feel comfortable engaging in the activity. There are many ways to scaffold experiences without prescribing the result" (Simon 2010, 13). "Visitors don't want a blank slate for participation. They need well-scaffolded experiences that put their contributions to meaningful use" (Simon 2010, 25).

7 "Whether the goal is to promote dialogue or creative expression, shared learning or co-creative work, the design process starts with a simple question: which tool or technique will produce the desired participatory experience?" (Simon 2010, 1).

8 "Being successful with a participatory model means finding ways to design participatory platforms so the content that amateurs create and share is communicated and displayed attractively" (Simon 2010, 3).

9 Nike Plus (Nike+) is a product that integrates an iPod and shoe sensor, intended for monitoring individual running performance. Providing users with real-time feedback on their running progress and storing detailed data for subsequent online analysis, Nike+ enables users to establish customized objectives and participate in friendly competitions with acquaintances or unfamiliar individuals by synchronizing paces or attaining predetermined mileage objectives.

of contribution.[10] Unlike previous user-centered studies, Simon's approach proposes a perspective rooted in digital practices that visitors are already accustomed to, which are widespread beyond institutional settings. Drawing from observations of online audience interactions, Simon delineated visitor profiles, ranging from passive spectatorial attitudes categorized as *inactive* to active engagement in co-designing and reimagining provided materials. These reflections on diverse forms of user interaction have allowed her to contextualize participation as a practice meant to complement existing activities within museum institutions, rather than supplanting them.[11] Simon conceives participation not as an obligatory component for contemporary museums but as one of many interpretative techniques available to be adopted according to interest.[12]

3.1.1. *Criticism on Design Thinking*

While not explicitly referencing it, Simon's proposed design approach undeniably resonates with the design thinking techniques that have been integrated into museum practice since the early 2000s.[13] Both approaches share a fundamental alignment in acknowledging the fundamental role of the user/visitor in shaping experiences and in striving to comprehend their needs. The primary focus lies on enhancing end-user experiences, a goal that Design Thinking pursues by crafting solutions that are perceived as relevant and rooted in expressed

10 Drawing from an understanding of social reality, Simon developed a categorization of participating audiences. Through research on online audiences. Simon classified participants into six distinct categories, recognizing that many individuals engage in multiple activities concurrently. These categories include: Creators (24%) — individuals who generate content, upload videos, and write blogs; Critics (37%) — those who post reviews, rate content, and provide commentary on social media platforms; Collectors (21%) — individuals who curate links and aggregate content for personal or social consumption; Participants (51%) — individuals who maintain accounts on social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn; Viewers (73%) — individuals who consume blogs, watch YouTube videos, and frequent social media platforms; and finally, Inactive (18%) — individuals who abstain from visiting social media platforms.

11 "Participatory strategies as practical ways to enhance, not replace, traditional cultural institutions" (Simon 2010, iii).

12 "These techniques represent an addition to the design toolkit, not a replacement for traditional strategies" (Simon 2010, 349) / "There may be a few institutions that become wholly participatory and see their entire institutional culture and community image transformed by this adoption. But in most cases, participation is just one design technique among many, one with a particular ability to enhance the social experience of the institution. Implementing participatory techniques requires some changes to institutional perspectives on authority and audience roles, but these changes may be as small or large as a particular organisation's commitment" (Simon 2010, 6).

13 The Design Thinking is a set of cognitive, strategic, and practical processes aimed at innovation, the application of which can be summarized based on four fundamental principles: creativity – understood as the tools and methodologies that support idea generation; Prototyping, which allows visualizing strengths and weaknesses of projects; the role of the end user who is involved in the testing phases of the project and the duration of the process, which favors divergent phases and dynamics, where numerous new ideas are generated through long brainstorming moments.

needs. Collaboration emerges as a critical component for the success of these models, which advocate for a pragmatic and experimental approach to problem-solving. Simon frequently alludes to a human-centered methodology, citing, for instance, the work pioneered by the design consultancy IDEO during the 2010s, a prominent commercial player in design thinking principles.[14]

Aligned with Simon's directives, museums have endeavored to innovate their practices by embracing a designerly approach over the past two decades. They have particularly valued the pragmatic approach and experimental ethos inherent in Design Thinking processes (Murphy 2018). However, in the early 2010s, prominent proponents of the practice began to question its efficacy, some going as far as labeling it a "failed experiment" (Nussbaum 2011). Criticisms abound, centering on the lack of a clear definition, inconsistent methodological application, and the absence of tools to assess its impact. Moreover, these critiques underscore the commercialization of Design Thinking, prioritizing organizational economic gain (Brown 2009; Martin 2009) at the expense of recognizing its social and political implications.

Design Thinking has strayed from its disciplinary roots, neglecting the critical tradition that initially informed its methodological underpinnings. The concepts that have propelled its contemporary popularity, both in museums and elsewhere, fail to acknowledge the earlier literature developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Initial observations by key figures such as Nigel Cross (1982, 1992, and 1998), Donald Schön (1983), Bryan Lawson (1991, 1997), and Richard Buchanan (1983) aimed to understand the processes and methods employed by designers in their practice. Buchanan, in particular, steered design theory away from the confines of craft and industrial production towards a more encompassing Design Thinking, conceptualizing the discipline as a liberal art equipped to respond to the complexities of technological culture.

Today, the concept of Design Thinking is predominantly associated with a managerial context, addressing organizational challenges in companies. Tim Brown, leader of the design consultancy IDEO, and Roger Martin, former dean of the Rotman School of Management (Toronto), formalized and popularized the expression in the early 2000s through influential publications (Brown 2009 and Martin 2009). While each author offers distinct perspectives and contextualization

14 The Human-Centered Design (HCD) approach places the user at the center of the entire creative process as a design methodology. A human-centered approach extends beyond the usability of a specific product, seeking to meet deep human needs. Embracing the diversity of human perspectives, HCD incorporates elements of empathy, collaboration, and iteration, aiming to create solutions that are authentically relevant and meaningful to those who use them.

of their methods, both explore the role of design within organizations as an innovative problem-solving approach. Brown places particular emphasis on empathy and user-centricity, advocating for experimentation and iteration as core problem-solving values. Martin, on the other hand, examines the methods utilized by successful managers, viewing design thinking as a competitive advantage for organizations. These contributions underscore a shift from studying individual designer practices to a broader consideration of organizational systems informed by a managerial framework.

Simon's decision to base her concept of participation on a commercially-driven model justifies significant scrutiny regarding her vision for museums. Her perspective represents a pragmatic strategy, aimed at safeguarding institutional interests, to confer renewed legitimacy to the museum in an era of increasing competition in the leisure and knowledge market. Its primary emphasis lies in augmenting visitor numbers for financial stability and external institutional validation. However, over the past decade, several of the case studies examined in her book have raised concerns among experts across various disciplines. Dominant players such as Google or Facebook have faced legal challenges due to their monopolistic and anti-competitive practices. Their strategies have sparked apprehension regarding the control exerted over users, particularly concerning privacy and the manipulative use of algorithms to shape behavior and foster information bubbles. Methods that cast doubt on the transparency of user interactions with these platforms.

Participation in digital realms, notably on social media, has also come under critical scrutiny by numerous scholars (Morozov 2011; Lovink 2016 and 2019; Zuboff 2018), who have highlighted how centralized control wielded by the creators of these digital platforms contradicts the dialogical openness and exchange expected and promoted by these tools. These criticisms prompt fundamental inquiries into the validity and ethicality of adopting these references as models for developing and implementing participatory processes in museums.

3.1.2. *Restructuring the Museum While Rethinking Participation*

Within this framework, a multitude of scholars, including Nora Sternfeld (2018), Jenny Kidd (2016), and Rina Kundu along with Nadine Kalin (2015), have recently criticized the contemporary understanding and implementation of participation in museums as a neoliberal form of engagement. Participatory endeavors are often reduced to mere instruments for legitimizing the existence of museums, where participation becomes a superficial means to quantitatively assess audience involvement. Cultural institutions frequently fail to pursue the intrinsic

values embedded in participatory processes, neither do they afford audiences the opportunity to negotiate the content and formats presented to them. Current participatory engagement practices in museums often entail superficial involvement in simplistic co-creation activities, primarily geared towards maintaining a superficial consensus among stakeholders. Such activities restrict the contributions of participants to experiences with predetermined outcomes, such as completing surveys or participating in focus groups (Groten 2019). Audience involvement is often geared towards preserving a contrived consensus, where dissent and conflict inherent in genuine engagement are suppressed by predefining the terms of participatory experiences in advance (Keshavarz and Mazé 2013). These activities, lacking critical interrogation of their premises, inherently presuppose an implicit consensus.[15] In this surrogate political landscape, participation unfolds within a top-down consultation model that perpetuates existing power dynamics.

While museums justify the use of scaffolded experiences as a means to facilitate the activation of the audiences (Simon 2010), these explanations sidestep the fact that institutions retain control, authority, and exclusive access. A striking incongruity emerges in museums' professed adherence to participatory models while concurrently upholding institutional control as a prerogative (Spock 2009; Takahisa 2011; Lynch 2011, and 2014). Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that designers find themselves relegated to peripheral roles within participatory processes. As noted by Sangiorgi and Junginger (2009), "institutions tend to employ designers as peripheral actors whose design activities are geared towards external customers" (2009, 2). Designers operate within contexts where the conditions are already predetermined, exerting minimal influence in which they are engaged.

> Designers are kept away from questioning underlying assumptions, values, norms, and beliefs. They are hired and used to express existing values and norms through new service offerings rather than to inquire into the organizational system and its culture, both of which have a strong influence on the ways services can be delivered and provided. (2009, 3)

Participatory strategies remain therefore "practical ways to enhance, not replace, traditional cultural institutions" (Simon 2010, iii), not substantially impacting existing processes.

15 "The first instance of consensus is already evident in an agreement upon a problematic, which 'they' have seen in 'their' own way" (Keshavarz and Mazé 2013, 12).

However, the crisis facing contemporary museums underscores the limitations of merely adopting participatory practices as a formal solution. Recently, both the academic (Kidd 2014, 13) and museum communities have come to recognize the value of participatory practices.[16] Scholars have long advocated for a shift in perspective, moving from simply doing things *for* users to actively designing *with* them. This shift, as noted by Leadbeater (2009) and Black (2012), emphasizes the importance of co-creation and collaboration in shaping museum experiences. The goal is for these participatory processes to significantly and positively influence the museum's structure, leading to substantive and transformative changes within the institution. The impact of these processes should influence the museum structure in a substantial and transformative way (Bradburne 2008) in an exchange which, according to Spock (2009), should ultimately result in an institutional change.[17]

As illustrated by the analysis of best practices in Chapter 2 of this thesis, museums' attempts to integrate diverse voices frequently influence their conventional structure and role.[18] While the methods and content of communication have evolved over time, the organizational and management structures of museums have remained largely unchanged since the nineteenth century. Therefore, rethinking participation must necessarily coincide with a restructuring of the museum's internal framework (Sennett 2013, 7).

3.2. *Design as a Tool of Inquiry*

An alternative application and interpretation of the role of design could offer valuable support to these processes. The historical connection between design practices and utopian ideals, present since the inception of design (Margolin 1997), is characterized by a dynamic tension between the existing reality and the realm of possibilities. This dynamic creates a space that exists between the constraints of reality and the potential for innovation, necessitating new roles, contexts, and methods (within design) (Dunne and Raby 2013).

This premise highlights the need of a reimagined understanding of design that moves beyond a strictly functionalist interpretation, embracing a more inclusive and multifold perspective. In the past two

16 In the most recent museum definition agreed by ICOM in August 2022, the focus was placed on the involvement of the public: "(...) Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."

17 "If you invite people to really participate in the making of a museum, the process must change the museum" (Spock 2009, 6).

18 "(E)very modern organisation is in favour of cooperation; in practice, the structure of modern organisations inhibits it" (Sennett 2013, 7).

decades, the traditional view of design as an utilitarian science aimed solely at solving specific problems has expanded. Design is now seen as a cultural practice that collaborates with other disciplines to develop temporary solutions to emerging challenges (See, for example, Lorusso 2023; Mareis and Paim 2021; Mareis et al. 2022; Nocek and Fry 2021). Projects approached with a critical mindset do not present predetermined solutions; rather, meaning emerges through an interactive process involving both the designer, the audience, and the institution itself. This process generates a form of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), characterized by its self-awareness of contingency, partiality, and fluidity.

Designers facilitate a shared process of interpretation, where viewers actively engage with and interpret the presented material, revealing the multitude of meanings and potential contrasts inherent in complex realities challenging the institution. In this regard, design serves as a tool for inquiry, allowing for the exploration and generation of knowledge beyond the boundaries of the discipline (Buchanan 1992). Such an approach instigates a transformative change in the existing state of affairs, emphasizing the social and symbolic mandates of designers alongside their functional roles.

3.2.1. *Service Design: From Serving Society to Participating in Making the Social*

In recent years, the emergence of Service Design, also known as "Service Interaction Design," "Service Design Intervention," or "Organizational Transformation" (Junginger and Sangiorgi 2009), represents a notable evolution of the design discipline, particularly in response to the critiques leveled against design thinking in institutional contexts. This disciplinary field has swiftly evolved through dynamic interdisciplinary dialogues and, while it shares certain methodologies and principles with design thinking, it diverges in its focus and application areas, placing a specific emphasis on context and existing organizational systems.

Initially conceived as a user-centered approach aimed at enhancing and optimizing interactions between customers and service providers (Sangiorgi 2009), Service Design has recently undergone significant expansion in scopes, as noted by scholars in the field (Manzini 2011; Sangiorgi et al. 2017; Vink et al. 2021). The increasingly complex and systemic challenges of the contemporary world have broadened its application beyond traditional boundaries.

In the present socio-political, economic, and cultural landscape, Service Design has evolved to enhance its capacity for facilitating change within a diverse array of contexts, including organizations, communities, and institutions such as museums, governmental organizations, educational institutions, and similar entities (Vink et al. 2019; Wetter-Edman et al. 2018). An increasing number of practitioners are engaging in projects with the potential to catalyze transformative change within their working structures, extending beyond optional activities or peripheral engagements with collaborating institutions.

If the Design Thinking approach overlooks or disregards the existence of pre-existing design structures within museums, recent reflections on Service Design introduce a different and fundamental perspective on this issue. Drawing on the ideas of C.W. Churchman (1997) and Arie De Geus (1968), Sabine Junginger (2015) conceptualizes organizations as dynamic entities, constantly undergoing transformation driven by the human dimension that animates them. Junginger identifies four main pillars—*changing*, *managing*, *organizing*, and *designing*—around which organizations are structured. In this framework, design assumes a structural and foundational role within the organization, becoming an integral part of its DNA. This perspective underscores that as organizations evolve, they adapt and reorganize themselves over time, establishing unique histories and design contexts that shape their operational environments. While the reasons behind specific structures, procedures, or design practices may not always be readily apparent to individuals within the organization or to external designers, these aspects constitute what Junginger terms "design legacies" (2015). As Ott et al. (2003) emphasize, these contexts are not merely beliefs or values but deeply ingrained truths that are rarely questioned or consciously acknowledged.

For designers, it is crucial to recognize that the initiation of processes should not be detached or isolated from the people, structures, resources, and vision of the organization. Otherwise, there is a risk, as indicated by Junginger, that proposed ideas may appear disconnected from the organization's purpose or vision, leading them to be dismissed prematurely (2015). Instead, individuals within the organization must be able to contextualize proposed solutions within the organization's design legacy, incorporating its pre-existing design practices, approaches, and methods into the process.

This insight prompts a reevaluation of previous assumptions from various perspectives. Firstly, it redefines the role of designers, urging them to acknowledge and respect the experiences, skills, and knowledge already existing within the organizational structure in which they operate, or at least to incorporate and consider them when approaching it. The emphasis lies not on merely introducing design into

an organization, but rather on advancing existing practices by exploring alternative design methodologies and cultivating a design-oriented mindset (Michlewski 2008). This represents a departure from a traditional understanding of practice, which typically focuses on its functional application for swift problem resolution.

Within this new paradigm, designers, through their practice, facilitate the emergence of specific behaviors and configurations. As Junginger (2015) observes, few practitioners currently enter an organization equipped with a plan or tools to engage in a dialogue regarding its existing design practices, approaches, and implications. However, this revised understanding holds the promise of actually transforming an organization's inherent design practices and approach. Although designers are still commissioned by institutions with predefined tasks, a shift in their mindset and toolkit can prompt a reevaluation of the initial request in light of what the processes reveal as genuinely necessary. This outcome may not necessarily align with the organization's original expectations.

Another crucial aspect to consider concerns the application of the practice itself. Service Design, akin to other forms of design, typically begins its operation on the periphery of an organization. Designers are often viewed as suppliers of products intended to be conceived, planned, and delivered to individuals external to the organization. However, while Design Thinking aimed to provide definitive answers to posed problems, the approach of service designers is geared more towards conducting an open and systematic design investigation (Buchanan 2004; Dewey 1938).

Once again, Buchanan is instrumental in recontextualizing design activity as investigative in nature. Drawing on the ideas of John Dewey, Buchanan introduces the concept of "design as inquiry" (1992). This framework embodies a design approach that embraces the exploratory and investigative aspects of the design process. Rather than viewing design solely as an activity directed at resolving predetermined problems, the inquiry-based approach acknowledges that the very definition of the problem can evolve and unfold during the course of the process. Consequently, design is conceived as an ongoing investigation rather than a mere act of problem-solving.

This perspective enables the identification of potential issues that may impact the existing experiences within the organizational structure. By employing design as a process of inquiry and exploration, designers delve into the organization to grasp its fundamental structures and assumptions, ultimately proposing a renewed experience. By reframing design activity as an inquiry, designers can instigate,

implement, and institutionalize change within an organization, involving stakeholders both from within and outside the institution. This viewpoint has the potential to reconnect the design approach in institutions with its original methodological underpinnings.

As Francisco Laranjo observes, this shift signifies "a significant evolution in design practice (...) from the designer as author to the designer as researcher (...) a reflection of the discipline's maturity, seeking legitimacy as an investigative tool"[19] (Laranjo 2014). Recognizing design as a foundational organizational activity implies viewing it as essential and inevitable. This shift in perspective prevents design from being perceived or treated as an alien element that can be introduced by external experts or rejected by organization members (Junginger 2015, 216). Such an understanding transcends viewing the discipline merely as a set of techniques and tools; instead, it attributes to it a central role in transformative processes, thereby unlocking the potential for significant organizational change.

This approach, trialed across diverse institutional contexts such as postal and tax offices, has demonstrated promising outcomes. According to Junginger and Sangiorgi, "designers collaborating with public service organizations have the capacity to generate, implement, and institutionalize changes within these organizations, provided they adhere to an approach that engages individuals from both within and outside the organization" (2009, 3).

Organizational transformations can occur with varying degrees of impact on the existing structure. Denise Rousseau (1995) delineated three strategies organizations might employ for change: *drifting*, *adapting*, or *engaging* in radical transformation. While the first two strategies may not necessitate specific interventions to support the structure, radical transformation involves altering fundamental assumptions, beliefs, norms, and values held by individuals within the organization.[20] In the context of what is termed "organizational transformation" (Junginger and Sangiorgi 2009), design can function

19 In the 1990s, the concept of '*designer as author*' underwent a significant evolution within the field of graphic design, with the emergence of critical approaches to design practice. This period was characterizedcharacterised by an increased awareness of the role of designers in shaping visual culture and producing meaning through their works. The teachings of reception theorists, such as Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, pushed designers to consider the process of interpretation and reception of their work as an integral part of the design process. As a result, designers were increasingly seen as cultural authors of their works, with a creative and interpretative role that raised questions of responsibility and ethics in the design process.

20 The fundamental assumptions are outlined by Denise Rousseau (1995) as "the often unconscious beliefs that members share about their organization and its relationship to them." They exert a stabilizing effect on the organization and constitute the "core" of an organization's culture around which behavioral norms, values, patterns of behavior, and artifacts or products evolve.

as a supportive investigative tool. These processes may encounter significant resistance from the organization and require substantial commitment from its members. Achieving this entails collaborative efforts between organization members and external designers to co-create a vision and agenda for change. Such collaborative endeavors necessitate long-term engagement that extends beyond the typical timelines of design projects. Building trustful relationships conducive to change is paramount in this endeavor (Junginger 2015).

When designers engage in dialogue with the organization, it often reveals underlying assumptions embedded within its structure. Subsequently, designers' interventions shed light on new perspectives for addressing challenges: by crystallizing and disseminating insights gained through collaborative reflection, they cultivate a vision that can guide transformative interventions. This approach, by stimulating discourse on social issues, kindles practical imagination and spurs action toward envisioning and effecting change (Dunne and Raby 2013b; Hanna 2019).

This approach has been recently further contextualized through the concept of a *system convener* by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner. The two scholars describe the system convener "as a person who convenes both insiders, outsiders, and other relevant stakeholders to produce a common strategy for systemic change" (2021, 21). The concept presents an evolution of leadership that goes beyond the traditional idea of individual guidance and focuses on facilitating and catalyzing systemic change. This figure acts as a facilitator, coordinator, and catalyst within a complex system, bringing together key actors to address complex challenges and promote positive change. The role of the system convener is to create connections, facilitate dialogue, and build collaborations among stakeholders to develop innovative and sustainable solutions to systemic problems. Taking a systemic approach means exploring and analyzing the various components of a system and understanding how they mutually influence each other. The overall ambition with this approach is to develop a strategic plan to design interventions in systems or design an entire new system, but while technical systems can be completely redesigned, social systems can only be intervened upon as they are more complex and difficult to change (Van der Bijl-Brouwer and Malcolm 2020).

The description highlights an approach that operates outside the confines of traditional disciplinary boundaries, aiming to address the complex challenges of our present time more effectively. Systems conveners seek to enable conversations and learning across these boundaries and take a variety of approaches to their convening, from opening spaces for new conversations, to running a joint project, to

connecting people or promoting an idea. And most of them mix and match several of these elements.

According to Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, designers can assume this role (ibid.), leveraging their ability to model, simulate, and visualize potential solutions. This enables them to envision feasible, possible, and desirable futures through their capacity for vision-building (Morelli et al. 2020). Through these processes, designers engage with diverse stakeholders, initiating and facilitating participatory and co-creation methodologies. By employing their analytical and representational skills to understand the context and map the system in which they operate, designers enhance comprehension and explore how various stakeholders influence it, as well as the strategies, policies, and institutional arrangements shaping the specific system. These capabilities are utilized throughout the design process and via the adoption of various tools. At the same time, by bringing their modeling capacity into play, designers facilitate opportunities for co-creation and contexts that can support participation.

3.2.2. *Adversarial Design: Deconstructing Hegemonic Representations*

The concepts of "dissent"[21] (Rancière 1995) and "agonistic pluralism"[22] (Mouffe 2000), discussed in Chapter 1, play a central role in imbuing the notion of participation in museums with a critical dimension. This inevitably entails a conceptual and strategic shift for the mandate of designers as well. Rancière's notion of *dissensus* reimagines participation by placing conflict at the core of the democratic process. The suppression of dissent in societal representations, according to the French philosopher, signals a shift in democratic practices towards a mere series of administrative procedures, where moments of tension and conflict lose their critical strenght and are instead resolved through

21 *Mésentente* is a concept elucidated by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière in his theoretical framework. It denotes a state of disagreement or mutual incomprehension that arises among individuals or social groups when confronted with divergent opinions, values, or positions. Rancière regards *mésentente* as a foundational element of political and social dynamics, shedding light on the existence of conflicts and tensions within the public sphere. However, rather than perceiving *mésentente* as inherently negative or requiring resolution, Rancière interprets it as an opportunity for societal evolution and transformation. By stimulating critical dialogue and engendering the emergence of new political paradigms and practices, *mésentente* serves as a catalyst for democracy and the proliferation of diverse voices within society.

22 The term *agonistic pluralism*, coined by Chantal Mouffe, encapsulates a democratic model that acknowledges and embraces social and political conflicts as inherent components of the democratic framework. In this perspective, the aim is not to eradicate conflicts but rather to harness them constructively through transparent confrontation and public discourse, thereby nurturing a more inclusive and diverse political engagement. Mouffe contends that agonistic pluralism serves to invigorate democratic processes by facilitating the coexistence of diverse viewpoints and facilitating continual negotiations over societal interests and values.

calculated consensus-building. Rancière views dissent as a strategy for effecting change and societal transformation through critical dialogue, fostering the emergence of new political formations.

Similarly, Mouffe's antagonistic and conflictual conception of the *political* underscores the indispensability and value of conflict in a democratic society. The imperative of maintaining ongoing confrontation cannot be reconciled with the creation of a rational, unanimous, and enduring consensus. Participation, according to the Belgian political scientist, is characterized as an ongoing struggle rather than a fixed endpoint or objective.

Both thinkers articulate the idea of consensus as a transient outcome of power stabilization, inherently entailing some form of exclusion. Rancière characterizes this phenomenon as the *distribution of the sensible* (2000), where societal divisions are perpetuated and enforced by institutions. These partitions delineate who is deemed qualified to observe, hear, or engage in discussion, and who is not. Such divisions are cemented through various practices, including design, which plays a role in shaping a regime of meaning. While many design practices may inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics, dissent-oriented approaches to design can disrupt established sensibilities, steering design practices towards rupturing or distancing from prevailing visual regimes and cognitive frameworks.[23] By visualizing and embodying conditions of inequality, such approaches enable interventions aimed at modifying, expanding, redefining, or replacing them, thereby incorporating new elements or subjects previously excluded.

The reflections presented, manifesting in the design field over the past decade, serve to redefine the role of designers within the contexts they engage with. The concept of Adversarial Design (2012), presented by design scholar Carl DiSalvo, finds purpose in visualizing and articulating the underlying conditions that define a particular social issue, aiming to unveil new representations of it. Through projects designed to spark debate and social consciousness, an adversarial approach delves into a given social problem by highlighting its underlying conditions. The political dimension of Critical-Speculative Design extends beyond the content of a project, encompassing the manner in which these issues are articulated and represented as contentious aspects of reality. This involves visualizing the logical framework within which the problem is situated, described, and understood.

23 The concept of conflict is characterized as "a break in the way we perceive and experience the world in which we are presently located and its taken-for-granted sensible and social orders" (Keshavarz and Mazé 2013, 19).

Richard Buchanan stands as one of the most influential figures who redirected attention to the cultural and social significance of design practices. Since the late 1980s, Buchanan has been advocating for the development of a new model for studying and practicing design. According to Buchanan, design can be viewed as a modern form of rhetoric, serving as "an art of shaping society, altering the course of individuals and communities, and establishing patterns for new action" (Buchanan 1985, 93). In this rhetorical model,[24] the role of the designer transcends the mere production of objects, systems, or services; rather, it assumes social significance as the designer constructs and disseminates an argument through their productive activity.[25] This concept, present in the thoughts and practices of designers, artists, and architects since the early 1900s, gained momentum and legitimacy in the latter half of the 20th century, challenging the principles of modernist design. DiSalvo (2012) effectively reintroduces the communicative and rhetorical dimension of design projects already present in Buchanan's work, through the notion of design as a normative practice—a discipline that not only describes reality but also intervenes directly in it or in our encounters with it.[26]

3.2.3 *Speculative Interventions: Producing a Distance from Reality*

The concept of Adversarial Design finds practical application in what Carl DiSalvo has termed 'speculative intervention' (DiSalvo 2014). Speculative intervention encompasses design approaches explicitly oriented towards social investigation and the construction of knowledge. Projects identified as speculative interventions diverge from conventional market-driven objectives, instead focusing on activities and

24 Buchanan's reflections consider the conception of rhetoric that emerges from classical texts and authors, especially Aristotle and Cicero: "Rhetoric [...] provided the organisation of thought in narrative and argument as well as the composition and arrangement of words in style. Yet rhetoric was not conceived by Aristotle as an art of words. It was an art of thought and argument whose product found embodiment in words as a vehicle of presentation" (Buchanan 1995, 31). However, for Buchanan the term is not limited to a persuasion technique used in public speeches or in logical-verbal argumentation, but can be interpreted as a strategy of thought applicable to various spheres of human activity: "Following McKeon's strategy, however, the study of rhetoric in our period would not stop with the work of formally recognised rhetoricians and scholars of rhetoric. McKeon argued that rhetoric is an unusually clear example of a general tendency among the arts and sciences for doctrines and devices to move across disciplinary boundaries and stimulate innovation in new circumstances" (Buchanan 2001, 184).

25 "Most important, however, is the idea of argument, which connects all of the elements of design and becomes an active engagement between designer and user or potential user. This article suggests that the designer, instead of simply making an object or thing, is actually creating a persuasive argument that comes to life whenever a user considers or uses a product as a means to some end" (Buchanan 1985, 95-96).

26 "It is how things could or ought to be. As a normative endeavour, design stands in contrast to disciplines or practices that produce descriptions or explanations alone. Design attempts to produce new conditions of the tools by which to understand and act on current conditions" (DiSalvo 2012a, 16).

processes aimed at generating and disseminating forms of knowledge. This knowledge transcends the boundaries of the design discipline, addressing broader issues and problems. As articulated by DiSalvo, "One of the distinctive and challenging aspects of speculative interventions as a mode of inquiry is that although they are done through design, they are not necessarily done for design" (2014, 1). In other words, the knowledge produced through speculative interventions may not directly inform the creation of products or services; rather, its value lies in revealing contemporary conditions and articulating societal issues.

The critical dimension of this design approach lies in dismantling hegemonic representations, providing users with access and space for reflection and confrontation regarding the meaning of these representations and the constructed image of reality.[27] As DiSalvo emphasizes, the term *design* in speculative interventions has been replaced by the more action-oriented term *intervention*, imbuing the process with a political undertone. However, design remains integral to these interventions, which are project-based and draw upon contemporary design practices conceptually and materially. Nevertheless, they aspire to transcend traditional notions of design, serving as a form of social research that employs design tools and methodologies. The ultimate goal of speculative interventions is not to enhance the design of products or services in the present but rather to uncover the underlying conditions of design and articulate the problems inherent within these conditions.

The use of the concept of speculation provides an opportunity to establish a distinction or distance from the pre-existing images and representations of the realities narrated (Dunne and Raby 2013). In temporally situating their narratives, speculative interventions direct action towards phenomena, situations, and aspects of present reality. This decision holds political significance as engaging directly with aspects of current reality aims to generate new images, representations, and formulations, thereby introducing a gap, a difference, and a distance from the present.

Speculation is intricately linked to the production of critical knowledge aimed at comprehending social reality and involving active components in its construction. Graphic design historian Emily McVarish underscores the social value inherent in speculative projects:

27 "One of the distinctive and challenging aspects of speculative interventions as a mode of inquiry is that although they are done through design, they are not necessarily done for design. That is, the knowledge produced through speculative interventions does not necessarily have close or tactical value to the making of products or services. Rather, the value of speculative interventions is the ways they make manifest contemporary conditions and articulate issues" (DiSalvo 2014, 1).

> Abstract, theoretical, contemplative, and conjectural work all entails at least a momentary distance from the real, and I think the space made by that distance is key to the contributions that distinguish this work. (...) But to say that such work doesn't touch reality would be a mistake, since, even if only by comparison with 'real' or practical work, it enters our sense of the real: what is and is not possible within the confines or definitions of the real, what would have to change in order for something different to be possible, and so on. This more elastic sense of the real is speculative work's great gift to us, since it reminds us that reality, at least social reality, is a construct—a construct in which design participates. (McVarish 2014, 29)

The objective of a Critical-Speculative Design approach is, therefore, not so much to achieve the most accurate or correct description of reality possible, but to produce a difference or a distance from the traditional knowledge one has of that reality, in the hope of exerting, through that difference, pressure and thus a change in the present state of affairs. Generating new forms and representations with which to reimagine and articulate a specific social or political issue implies engaging in the construction of that very issue. Its visualization, through which the designer gives it form and presence, somehow determines the information with which that problem is described, the experience that is made of it, and thus the knowledge and type of relationship that can be entertained with it. The endeavor is to elucidate the actors, processes, relationships, and parameters contributing to the definition of these situations.

In the past fifteen years, the Dutch duo Metahaven[28] has distinguished itself as one of the most insightful attempts to reconfigure design activity around the idea of research through design.

28 Founded by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden in 2007 as a design and research studio, Metahaven has come to define a new methodology in graphic design. The studio's speculative practice prioritizes the use of graphic design as a tool for knowledge production, employing it to scrutinize organizational models and power dynamics. The studio produces a continuous stream of research that rarely results in finite, codified work. They publish books and essays, organize conferences and collaborate with policy makers, concurrently working on new commissions while maintaining a variety of self-initiated projects. Over the last fifteen years, Metahaven has dealt with themes concerning the role of design in the redefinition of the international geopolitical landscape (*Meta Haven Sealand Identity Project, Uncorporate Identity*); the new forms of propaganda and the politics of information (*The Sprawl, Information Skies, Hometown, Chaos Theory*); the upheaval affecting democratic processes in the age of the internet and social networks (*Nulpunt, Facestate, Can jokes bring down governments?*); the contradictions inherent in the transparency society and cloud infrastructure (*Black Transparency*, the Wikileaks rebranding project). These projects, either conceived by Kruk and van der Velden themselves or commissioned by entities active in the world of culture — research institutes, foundations, museums, publishing houses — are developed through methodologies that the designers themselves define as speculative (Metahaven 2009a 2010,11; 2011a; 2011b; 2014), and that find concrete form in various outputs: book publishing, essay and article writing, feature films, web applications, branding and merchandising, exhibitions and seminars.

The members of Metahaven define their work as "research-driven design" or "design-driven research" (van der Velden 2006), highlighting how these two activities are conceived as a unified practice aimed at generating new knowledge. In the perspective outlined by Metahaven, investigative and research activities gain further significance when directed towards issues or aspects of reality that extend beyond the realm of design alone.[29] Their practice aims to develop strategies and visual communication practices to analyze and represent issues that transcend disciplinary boundaries. For Metahaven, the speculative approach guiding their design development takes the form of an articulatory activity (Facchetti 2016), aimed at shaping the various conditions of visibility through which a given problem, phenomenon, or aspect of reality is represented and mediated using design tools. Their work takes shape through a variety of media—branding, video, posters, publications, and exhibitions—where design is employed to identify, investigate, and articulate social and political issues.

The speculative approach is employed by Metahaven as a method of analysis and as a practice of creative construction—a research practice that does not follow a linear and solution-driven progression. In their projects, images cease to behave as—or to be consumed or experienced as—objective descriptions and transpositions of reality, revealing their performative capacity to construct meanings, reproduce systems of values and beliefs, or influence social behaviors, as seen in projects such as the visual identity for *Sealand* (2009)[30] or in the films *The Sprawl*[31] (2016) and *Possessed* (2018). Each Metahaven project

29 "The true investment is the investment in design itself, as a discipline that conducts research and generates knowledge - knowledge that makes it possible to seriously participate in discussions that are not about design" (Metahaven 2011a) "New models for design would ideally not just contribute to the overall discussion about design. They would also influence how we talk about the things that design is about" (Metahaven 2009a, 259).

30 Metahaven *Sealand* identity project was an investigation into the concept of branding by designing the visual identity for the Principality of Sealand –an artificial structure created by the British government during World War II in British territorial waters and occupied since 1967. In 2000, Sealand was approached by HavenCo, a company offering data hosting services, which proposed the Principality to become a data haven. In van der Velden's eyes, Sealand thus begins to represent a geographical and political reality whose peculiarities –being a self-proclaimed independent micro-nation and at the same time a data center on the border of legality– question and reveal the contradictions implicit in certain geopolitical categories of the contemporary world. These considerations led to the idea of designing a visual identity for the Principality. The branding project, however, takes on the contours of a research carried out with the tools of visual design aimed at articulating certain problems inherent in the concepts of nation-state, sovereignty, legality, and criticalities implicit in the Internet infrastructure. The aim of a project such as *Sealand* do not end with the construction of a new visual identity. The purpose is instead to identify borderline situations that aid in understanding the evolution or shifts impacting specific categories of our cognition and to demonstrate the role that design practices play in these processes of change.

31 Their first film, *The Sprawl* (2015), explores the mutation of propaganda in the age of social media. The film thematises the multiplicity of possible narratives in contemporary media expression, in a reality where narratives are no longer linear on individual media, but converging,

translates into an investigation into the conditions of visibility that determine the ways in which certain phenomena and aspects of social reality are represented and through which they manifest their presence and agency in the world. In this sense, investigating and articulating the visibility conditions of a certain phenomenon means determining the premises under which that phenomenon allows itself to be known. These visibility conditions determine or influence the processes of information construction and dissemination, processes in which design plays a crucial role. The ultimate meaning of these projects is not offered as a pre-packaged product but emerges from a process involving both the producer and the recipient of the message. The epistemic activity of Metahaven's speculative projects is oriented towards the idea of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), a form of knowledge characterized by partiality and instability. Metahaven fosters a shared process of signification, not imposing a predetermined form of knowledge but bringing out the plurality of meanings and possible contrasts that arise from operating in a complex reality, where the viewers are actively engaged in interpreting what they see.

Speculative interventions do not necessarily materialize in a tangible outcome but may culminate in the development of processes. A paradigmatic example of this methodology is exemplified by the long-term project 'New World Summit' (2012–ongoing) by visual artist and scholar Jonas Staal. His research embraces a speculative practice aimed at shaping alternative social scenarios. Staal organizes physical and discursive spaces directed at unrecognized organizations and political movements, enabling them to engage in political discussions and debates. Through the establishment of these temporary spaces –"alternative parliaments," "stateless embassies," or "transdemocratic unions" (Staal 2018)– Staal prompts imagining and reflection on alternative and potential democratic regimes, fostering an active arena where marginalized voices, often overlooked by society, can be heard and participate in the decision-making process. Rather than merely representing existing reality, Staal actively engages in creating new scenarios through the speculative approach. This involves not just presenting an alternative vision of reality but actively reformulating

the widespread and networked circulation of messages through these channels affects the way we read, interpret and understand events. Key to Metahaven's thinking is the concept of *sprawl*, which they identify as an ecosystem in which parallel narratives coexist with respect to the notion of truth. Presented both online as a series of short films distributed on various platforms, and in the gallery as a multi-channel video installation, *The Sprawl* exists in a multiplicity of formats dispersed to occupy the same space as its subjects, becoming in essence, as in the subtitle given by Metahaven, "propaganda about propaganda." This is consistent with the speculative nature of the project, where the narrative itself problematizes the subject context of the work.

political dynamics through critical examination and the construction of new paradigms.

3.3. *Integrating Speculative Approaches into Service Design*

The analysis presented in this chapter highlights a noteworthy transformation in the conventional dynamic between designers and clients, as embodied by the *problem-solving* paradigm, which is currently undergoing substantial scrutiny. However, the crisis of this model has simultaneously created a new space to explore and test the validity of other design approaches, where the role of the designer can be redefined starting from an activity of generating new *research-driven* knowledge. This shift in perspective, a shared attitude within the design world, promotes a reconsideration of the profession as an activity capable of producing its own forms of knowledge. Beyond simply implementing solutions, designers engage in a versatile professional practice that involves identifying, investigating, and articulating complex social and political issues. Within the speculative approach to design, the focus shifts from predicting trends to exploring the diverse ways in which problems, phenomena, or realities are represented and mediated through design tools. This approach, exemplified by the work of practitioners such as Metahaven, Jonas Staal, and the critical reflections of Carl DiSalvo, involves an active exploration of different conditions of visibility. The speculative approach functions both as an analytical tool for examining complex situations and as a creative practice for generating new representations. Research and critical inquiry into social, political, and ethical issues require ongoing articulation of the problem, adapted to the historical and cultural contexts in which they arise. In parallel, it is used as a design practice to generate new representations of such contexts. Research or critical inquiry into social, political, or ethical issues requires a continuous process of articulating the problem, which varies depending on the historical and cultural conditions in which these problems arise. The activity is oriented towards the production of new representations of the problem, developing innovative strategies to give visibility, shape, and presence to a problematic situation that, due to specific mutations, struggles to be recognized as such.

In this regard, the role of the designer-researcher is intricately tied to the generation of new forms of knowledge, wherein the created representations provide renewed perspectives for observing, assessing, and engaging with the pertinent issues. This investigative and research activity gains enhanced significance when directed towards matters or elements of reality that extend beyond the domain of design alone.[32]

Currently, speculative approaches and Service Design are related but not organically integrated. However, their synergy has been indicated as highly advantageous by multiple scholars in the field (Lin and Villari 2022; Kueh et al. 2022; McGee 2021). Service Design is engaged in shaping change, yet its work often focuses on resolving processes aimed at the near future. From this standpoint, speculative approaches could offer perspectives beyond the horizon of crisis. Service designers may thus not only reflect on the past and present of the system in which they operate but also consider its potential futures. Additionally, speculative approaches, characterized by critical/reflexive, systematic, and long-term thinking, can expand the design process, making it co-creative (Lin and Villari 2022). Rather than following a predetermined plan, the speculative approach emphasizes critical thinking by integrating reflection and dialogue with the public into the processes (Dunne and Raby, 2013a). This approach enables service design to become inclusive, involving both internal and external stakeholders. This combined approach aims to promote collective reform to generate value through the co-creation of services that can contribute to the transformation of the system as a whole. These processes challenge assumptions, fundamental beliefs, norms, and deeply rooted values to explore innovative futures of services (Koskela-Huotari et al. 2021; Rousseau 1995).

3.3.1. *The Agency of Images*

In analyzing the use of images within the context of Critical-Speculative Design, reference must be made to the "iconic turn" (Boehm 1994), also known as "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1992, and 2009), which occurred in the 1990s. Images are no longer perceived or used simply as objective descriptions of reality, but instead reveal their performative power in constructing meanings, reproducing systems of values and beliefs, and influencing social behaviors. According to Hito Steyerl, "Images changed their function," emphasizing that they "became active catalysts of events – not records or documents. (...) They are nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems" (Steyerl 2013).

32 "The true investment is the investment in design itself, as a discipline that conducts research and generates knowledge –knowledge that makes it possible to seriously participate in discussions that are not about design" (Metahaven 2011a). This implies that "designers have started expanding their skills to formulate models and speculative scenarios. As such, they are bringing design thinking into areas off-limits to the strictly productive reach of what it is designers do, into a more strategic understanding of what design might become" (Metahaven 2011a).

In this regard, for a designer, producing new representations to reframe and articulate a certain social or political issue means actively contributing to the exploration of that issue. The configuration and emanation through which such an issue is visually manifested, influence the information conveyed, the experiences evoked, and consequently, the degree of understanding and the type of relationship that can be established with it.

At the core of this *iconic turn* lies the idea that humans organize and give meaning to the reality they are immersed in through the production and consumption of images and visual representations. Thanks to studies conducted at the end of the 20th century by scholars such as Gottfried Boehm and William J.T. Mitchell, the idea has spread in contemporary societies that cognitive processes, involving the composition of fragments of the surrounding reality within a horizon of meaning or a logical framework, as well as activities of communication and representation of knowledge, cannot be solely reduced to language and verbal logic but also require a broad recourse to visual expressive forms. Boehm, in his theory on the metaphoricity of visual languages (1995/2009), refers to the concept of "polyvocality" to clarify how visual languages can produce and deploy complex and articulated levels of information starting from two-dimensional artifacts. Referring to metaphors, it describes the production of a surplus of meanings through which it becomes possible to relate semantic fields and distant worlds. The ability of metaphors to "say by showing" is formed through aspects such as incompleteness, openness, polysemy, and contrast, namely the ability to "bring together differences without suppressing them" (Boehm 2009, 45). According to Boehm, these characteristics make the metaphor the "structural model of imaginality" (2009, 56). The image of reality produced through metaphor cannot, therefore, be considered a copy but a new representation that adds something more than the original image. The knowledge thus produced does not derive from mere imitation or simulation but from a creative and productive activity of knowledge (ibid.). When looking at an image, the observer does not behave as when faced with a written text, where the production of meanings and forms of knowledge passes through precise syntactic and semantic rules. In this case, knowledge can instead be generated by the encounter of the image with the observer's gaze.

The essence of this transformation has been explored by Georges Didi-Huberman (2004). Building his reflections on Benjamin's observations, Didi-Huberman outlines the process of 'orientation in the image' through two fundamental phases, delineated as suspension and construction. According to Didi-Huberman, "the readability of images (...) will first require suspension, a temporary muteness in front of a visual object that leaves us disoriented, devoid of the ability to make sense of it, perhaps even to describe it; it will then impose the construction of this silence in a work of language capable of operating a critique of its own clichés. A well-looked-at image would then be an image that has managed to disorient us, and then renew our language, and thus our thought" (Didi-Huberman 2009, 255).

The knowledge derived from images gains significance and social relevance when the interaction between a visual representation and the observer's gaze leads to a transformation in both the depicted object and the viewer themselves. Boehm's theory of the metaphoricity of visual languages has sparked further reflections on the 'performativity of images' (Mitchell 2005). According to Mitchell, images assume an active role in shaping the social reality they depict, influencing the interaction between individuals and their environment. Mitchell examines how the represented object is shaped through the interaction between the image and the observer.

> The more far-reaching shift, signaled by the quest for an adequate concept of visual culture, is the emphasis on the social field of the visual, that is, on the everyday processes of looking (...) and being looked at. This complex terrain of reciprocal gazes is not just a secondary effect of social reality, but actively constitutes it. Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and is not reducible to language, "the sign," or discourse. Images want (...) to be considered as complex individuals assuming a multiplicity of subjective positions and identities. (Mitchell 2009, 119)

The shift produced by the *iconic turn* entails the realization that every visual depiction extends beyond mere description of its subject matter. Instead, it establishes the logical framework and horizon of meaning through which the depicted object will be experienced, understood, and discussed. Hence, the concept of communication as transmission is replaced by that of negotiation. A critical analysis of a visual artifact must first recognize, in addition to an initial explicit function, an additional dimension "which is not limited at all to accompanying its object, but even establishes it; a dimension that does not simply 'inform', but knows how to 'express' meaning, generate knowledge" (Pinotti and Somaini 2009, 15).

3.3.2. *Design and Constructing Imaginaries*

The concept of image agency allows for a reassessment and

reconsideration of the social value acquired by visual representations in relation to the performativity of visual artifacts. This idea has long been present within discourses of Critical-Speculative Design, where visualization practices are regarded as tools aimed not so much at describing a certain phenomenon, but at its reframing. From this perspective, different representations of a particular aspect of reality can result in varied perceptions and assessments of that aspect (the cognitive context in which the phenomenon is comprehended), ultimately shaping diverse forms of interaction—and hence diverse social behaviors in how we engage with that phenomenon.

Building on these reflections, the processes in which the designer is involved are no longer to be seen as simple transfers of content from one point to another, where information and messages retain their value and meaning unchanged. Rather, the act of producing and disseminating a message is conceived as the construction of an argument or the expression of a point of view. When such a message is received by a subject, there is a confrontation about its meaning, which can lead to dialogue or challenge interpretations. Design emerges from this debate, assuming a crucial role in the processes of formation, structuring, organization, dissemination, defense, and contestation of culture. From this perspective, the designer becomes a cultural agent actively involved in the construction of the social reality in which they operate. The issue of the metaphorical nature of visual languages finds wide space within the practices of Critical-Speculative Design. These design approaches recognize the ability of visual representation to articulate and develop a multiplicity of meanings, elements, relationships, and processes that characterize the analyzed phenomenon, modifying and redefining it. The political dimension, understood as a concept of antagonism and dissent, emerges as a fundamental condition for designing new perspectives and representations in conflicting or controversial contexts.

Referring to the visualization processes through which reality is represented, the designer's effort extends beyond mere description to an attempt to reconfigure it in order to produce new knowledge related to it. The research activity towards which design practices are oriented serves not to describe an aspect of reality but rather to reconstruct it through a new representation. This consideration connects to what has already been discussed in this chapter, namely the idea that any design project should also be considered through the rhetorical dimension it incorporates.

Including the analysis of speculative visualization strategies within the framework of visual rhetoric legitimizes the notion

that the representation and communication of a certain situation or aspect of reality are not conceived as processes of objective or subjective description but rather as a reconstruction of the situation itself —both in its aesthetic components and its social value. The Critical-Speculative Design approach showcases its capacity to generate critical and context-specific insights by serving a dual purpose—analytical and creative. It achieves this by designing representations that challenge established understandings of a particular issue and by offering new perspectives for its examination.

The idea that images and visual artifacts contribute to constructing the object of their own representation, effectively participating in the social construction processes of reality, emerges in various manifestations of Critical-Speculative Design analyzed. This means that the products and outputs of projects carried out according to a critical-speculative approach are conceived, designed, and disseminated not as factual descriptions of an aspect of reality but rather as reconstructions, which through enrichment, articulation, or the introduction of new perspectives, modify the field of visibility within which that same aspect is framed, analyzed, and rendered. The process of visualization contextualized within the framework described by the speculative approach becomes a strategy that, through a series of design tools and practices, serves both to analyze a given situation and to represent it and thus present it in an aesthetic form. The critical dimension that a project of *speculative visualization* (Kim and DiSalvo 2010) can incorporate and articulate is expressed on both these levels. It demonstrates its tendency towards building critical knowledge through its analytical function, problematizing the preliminary processes.

However, the critical dimension that these strategies can incorporate is also expressed in their creative function, namely in the construction and dissemination of new representations that effectively seek to introduce new meanings and knowledge about the analyzed situation. It is through this dual function—analytical and creative—that the design methodology of Critical-Speculative Design demonstrates its ability to build forms of critical and situated knowledge through the production of representations capable of destabilizing the acquired knowledge about a given problem and introducing new perspectives through which to consider that problem.

Discussion and further steps

The reflections and practical contributions presented in this chapter enable a broader perspective on the role of designers as social actors capable of critically engaging in various contexts. This alterna-

tive view of the discipline expands understanding of design's potential to impact the contexts in which it operates. Reframing design as a fundamental component within all organizational structures significantly changes both the approach and the tools available to designers. The designers' active involvement in negotiating the organizational conditions in which they intervene allows them to question the definition of problems more consistently. Making hidden assumptions tangible reshapes knowledge and the conditions for participation. Furthermore, negotiating and incorporating desirable possible scenarios through a speculative approach ensures that transformations are not solely addressed from a present perspective but also incorporate long-term implications. The redesigning of these representations involves their (social) construction, opening up spaces for dialogue and debate.

In the next chapter, I will critically analyze a case study conducted through participatory observation. The objective of this experience is to examine the role of design in the organizational transformation of the museum through participatory and collaborative practices. Departing from a solution-oriented approach, the focus lies on exploring strategies for adapting museum structures to enhance their capacity to support and facilitate public engagement. The enduring collaboration with the institution has facilitated the examination of how design impacts processes and, ultimately, highlights the civic relevance of museums as venues capable of embracing and amplifying diverse voices through participation.

Chapter 4
MUSEION ART CLUB:
PROTOCOL OF AN INTERVENTION TO REDEFINE PARTICIPATION

Introduction

The following chapter explores a practice-led and practice-based case study developed in collaboration with Museion, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bolzano (South Tyrol, Italy). In September 2021, Museion launched the first edition of the Art Club project, an initiative aimed at participatory programming of its public program. The intention behind this format was multifold: on one hand, the museum's desire was to strengthen its civic mandate and connection with local audiences by providing logistical and financial support to various creative communities in the area. Museion sought to serve as a platform and hub, bridging the gap between valuable initiatives scattered across the provincial territory. At the same time, the project aimed to engage an audience aged between 20 and 35, previously unconnected with the museum. Through the Art Club initiative, individuals representing this specific demographic were invited to engage in the institution's programming processes through a two-year contractual agreement, enabling direct interaction with the museum's staff.

The participatory approach and intentions promoted by Museion closely aligned with the questions guiding this research. These processes were thoroughly explored through active engagement in the project via participatory observation for over two years. The Art Club experience facilitated a comparison with the best practices outlined in Chapter 2, allowing for an examination of methods, formats, and objectives. Concurrently, the case study offered a practical exploration and an insider's perspective on the research questions, directly intervening in the systems to assess the validity of the proposed hypotheses. The two-year duration of participatory involvement enabled both an exploration over an unusually extended timeframe for a design project and an initial evaluation of the short- to medium-term impact of the implemented processes on the organization.

The present chapter offers a comprehensive examination of all project phases, starting from its inception to its evolution in the months following, aiming to support a reimagined participatory experience with transformative potential for the organization itself, as discussed in Chapter 1. The first part of this chapter delineates the structure, purpose, and objectives of the Art Club project upon its

launch and throughout its initial fifteen months, spanning from September 2021 to the spring of 2023. During this initial phase, the museum adopted a traditional hierarchical model characterized by top-down relationships with the Art Club team. Participation was primarily limited to event production. The misunderstandings regarding member roles and the format's impact on the museum's internal dynamics highlighted the need to start a revision process.

The subsequent analysis is divided into two main parts: the first part focuses on identifying and discussing the problematic elements that surfaced during the project's activities. This examination is based on data collected through my participatory observation of the experience, actively participating as a member of Art Club during its inaugural edition. It is aligned with the systemic change model proposed by Leadbeater and Winhall (2020). To reconstruct and map out the processes, meeting minutes and interviews with all Art Club participants were utilized. Semi-structured interviews conducted one year after the project's initiation served to evaluate the situation with both internal and external museum members. This collected data proved indispensable in delineating both the project's strengths and weaknesses, taking into account participants' expectations, work processes, and unresolved issues. A selection of ten of these interviews can be found in the volume's Appendix.

The second part of the analysis focuses instead on the processes of revision and transformation of Art Club's mandate initiated in early 2023. In this scenario, my involvement extends beyond participatory observation to serve as a system convener (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2021), facilitating the development of an alternative participation model for Art Club. Moving beyond mere functionality and productivity, the strategic application of design disciplinary tools initially supported and promoted the creation of spaces for discussion among a voluntary group of project participants. The working group, consisting of both internal and external museum members, worked to shape and redefine the potential and the scope of the participatory experience. The implemented processes were primarily focused on consolidating and visualizing a shared community of practice between museum audiences and staff. This initiative began with a reimagined understanding of participation, aiming to move beyond a reliance solely on quantitative metrics. This evolved understanding, aimed at establishing a shared discursive forum, inevitably required innovations in the organization and structure of the institution. This facilitated the creation of adequate and continuous spaces to accommodate a new plurality of voices and practices. These initiatives, although welcomed

and acknowledged by the museum as relevant, presented practical implementation challenges. Negotiations followed to adapt the organization's existing operational structures to align with the project's needs, exploring different operational models to facilitate a more collaborative and horizontally structured exchange.

4.1. *Museion*

Museion, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bolzano, was established forty years ago and has since attained widespread recognition as a focal point in the realm of contemporary art, both nationally and internationally. Relative to comparable Italian institutions, Museion has a medium-sized dimension and operates across five principal departments: curatorial, production, education and public services, communication and marketing, and archival stewardship of its collection. Founded in 1985 through private initiative as the Museum of Modern Art by the Museion Association, its inception aimed to foster a network of cultural institutions within the Euregio area,[1] collaborating alongside existing museums such as the Mart in Rovereto (Italy) and Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck (Austria). In 2000, it was renamed the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, aligning both its exhibition program and collection with the contemporary. Currently, the museum accommodates around 4,280 artworks, with half of them being on loan from private collectors or other institutions. In 2006, the museum underwent a restructuring of its management structure, transitioning to a public-private foundation primarily funded by the Autonomous Province of Bolzano. This funding is supplemented by contributions from the Museion Private Founders, a task force of local entrepreneurs.

The museum is situated within a culturally vibrant, multilingual, and economically prosperous context.[2] However, the relationship between the so-called *cube*[3] and the city has always been a subject of controversy: its relevance and impact on the territory have repeatedly been debated by the press, the political class, and citizens themselves. This is due to a perceived disconnect of the institution from the territory and to a curatorial program considered too elitist by the majority

1 The Euregio area is a cross-border region located in the Alps, involving parts of three European countries: Italy, Austria, and Germany. This region is characterized by intense and multidisciplinary cooperation among its cities and bordering regions to promote economic, social, and cultural development, as well as to address common challenges and leverage opportunities for cross-border collaboration.

2 According to surveys by the National Institute of Statistics, Alto Adige is indeed one of the Italian provinces with the highest quality of life in the country. Source: https://www.istat.it/it/files//2023/12/Nota-stampa_TAA.pdf

3 The museum is referred to as the cube because of its architectural form.

of the local population. Despite Museion having always had a loyal audience, the museum has long been perceived as distant from the interests of the territory.

At the same time, the provincial territory is characterized by a complex socio-political heritage. Until the First World War, the area was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was then annexed to the Italian state after the post-war agreements and forcibly Italianized during the Fascist regime. Despite significant progress made in recent decades in intercultural relations among different linguistic communities, traces of historical events have left deep legacies on the local generations.

Since 2008, Museion has found its home in a new building, which, along with the bridge behind it as an integral part of the project, connects the historic center of the city to the residential area located behind the museum, beyond the Talvera River. This infrastructure holds symbolic significance for the city, intending to serve as a connector between its diverse communities. On one side are the historically German-speaking residents, largely concentrated in the historic center, while on the other side are mainly Italian-speaking inhabitants who have established themselves in the newer peripheral neighborhoods across the river.

4.2. *Renewing Museion: Embracing a Civic Mandate*

Since June 2020, Bart van der Heide—formerly Director of the Kunstverein in Munich (2010-2015) and Chief Curator and Head of Research at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (2015–2019)—has assumed the role of Artistic Director at Museion. From the outset, van der Heide has championed a civic mandate for the museum that extends beyond "the sum of the exhibitions" it hosts (Appendix: van der Heide, 168). The social understanding of the museum's mandate was crucial in the candidate selection process. Marion Piffer Damiani, President of the Museion Foundation, explains: "Central to Van der Heide's vision is the social relevance of the museum, the contribution that a contemporary art museum can make to the future development of a society" (Exibart 2020). Leading van der Heide's program is the desire to transform the museum into a hub and a discursive platform for gathering cultural producers of the creative sector in the region. To achieve this, he has established the four-year program of his mandate on three fundamental pillars: in addition to consolidating an international profile with the exhibition program titled *Techno Humanities*,[4] he has emphasized collaborations with local stakeholders through a series of curated formats by the public services department, which he has named *Academy*,[5] and initiated a new field of participatory activities called *Art Club*,[6] aimed specifically at the 20-35 age group.

Through the development of this last project, the Director aimed to "strengthen urban culture in the territory"[7] and «build a meaningful constituency with the younger generations" (Salvaterra 2021). The goal was to give space and visibility to the community of creatives, professionals, and thinkers in South Tyrol. A selection of these target audiences was also tasked with curating the museum's public program. "When I arrived in South Tyrol, I was amazed to find that there were numerous exceptional individuals and entities in the field of creative professions," said Director van der Heide. "Figures and experiences that expressed an urban culture well connected to global networks and trends, but that had difficulty communicating with similar realities in their own territory" (Pintarelli 2022). Thus emerged the idea of transforming Museion into a hub capable of attracting and networking all this potential. This format represented a departure from the museum's past practices, where it sought to open up "to external knowledge in order to become a discussion partner rather than a one-way producer of content, (...) something that my team and I have developed and are developing from scratch, without any guidelines to follow and learning as we go" (ibid.). The reference models in conceptualizing Art Club did not necessarily come from the field of art, but primarily from club culture, exemplified by spaces like the Progress

4 Extending over three years, Techno Humanities reflects on the contemporary human condition. The core of the project are three large group exhibitions: *Techno* (2021), ~~*Kingdom of the Ill*~~ (2022) and *Hope* (2023), which each time occupied the entire building, an unprecedented decision in the history of Museion. In the director's intentions, the *Techno Humanities* project is not just a series of exhibitions, but rather a discursive space to express an institutional commitment. The project envisages an active participation in the construction of meanings through collaborations with experts, local representatives and other partnerships to promote and support perspectives of knowledge production, socio-political responsibility and relevant engagement both locally and internationally. To this end, the museum develops and expands in parallel with the exhibition program an agenda of institutional commitments in connection with each exhibition: support for subcultures for *Techno*, a focus on accessibility for ~~*Kingdom of the Ill*~~, and local solidarity for *Hope*.

5 The program Academy includes all educational activities of the department of Public Services. It works mainly with three types of audience: schools of different grades, from kindergarten to high school; universities, academies and research centers for long life learning projects; and audiences with special needs (e.g. learning difficulties, medical conditions, families with children, visitors with migrant backgrounds). For this last audiences in particular, activities are carried out in collaboration with local associations and institutions through a series of customized formats.

6 https://www.museion.it/en/initiatives/5376-museion-art-club

7 This and all subsequent quotations come from the slides prepared when the project was presented by Bart van der Heide to Forum members in September 2021.

Bar[8] in Amsterdam or the Pogo Bar[9] at the KW Institute in Berlin. These hybrid formats, blending elements of artistic spaces and cultural clubs, have proven effective in engaging audiences from diverse communities. Being a relatively young institution, and, therefore, potentially more open and flexible to change, Museion appeared to Director van der Heide as an ideal partner to explore and experiment with alternative organizational systems. Previously, during his tenure at the Kunstverein in Munich, he had introduced a multidisciplinary public program (Appendix: 177). Under those circumstances, various cultural communities in the city had organized and curated a calendar of independent events, with the financial and logistical support of the museum. Over time, these diverse practices had come into contact with each other, activating shared project work, mixing event participants, and recognizing the museum as their reference point. Museion seemed the suitable environment to revive and formalize these dialogues, actively embracing and incorporating the subcultural communities of the region into its fold.

A team comprising nine external members and nine museum staff was involved in the Art Club initiative. The initial mandate was from September 2021 to September 2023, foreseeing a two-year cycle. To identify external members for the first edition, Museion organized a preliminary meeting in June 2021 (Fig.1.), inviting a selected group of forty candidates professionally active in the area, whom the museum sought to engage. During the introductory meeting, participants were briefed on the project, its objectives, and the expected contributions. At the end of the session, all participants expressed their willingness to join the initiative. The following month, the museum finalized the selection of the nine participants for the first edition of the project, basing the selection criteria on the candidates' experiences and the relevance of their respective practices for the project. The selected participants have diversified backgrounds ranging from performing arts to electronic music, design, slam poetry, and other cultural sectors. They are not always individuals who have regularly attended the museum in the past as audiences.

8 *Progress Bar* is a monthly nightclub that has been active since 2015. Founded by Dutch curator and educator Juha Van 't Zelfde, it was initially based at Lighthouse, an arts charity in Brighton, and later moved to Sonic Acts, an interdisciplinary arts organization in Amsterdam. The project aims to provide a platform for underrepresented artists, where they deliver talks about their artistic practice during the events, followed by opportunities for attendees to dance to their music.

9 Berlin's *Pogo Bar*, located in the basement of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, is a program launched in 2017. It offers a weekly calendar of performances, readings, interventions, film screenings, and conversations curated by Sofie Krogh Christensen and Léon Kruijswijk, assistant curators at KW.

At the inception of the project, Museion committed its financial and logistical resources, offering access to its workforce, communications department, partnership network, facilities, and equipment. External members of Art Club were offered an annual contract of 1,000 euros for monthly programming meetings, each lasting approximately two hours. Their role as independent external consultants involved collaborating with the Museion team to conceive the public program, while the project's execution was entrusted to the event management and production departments.

The museum established three distinct working groups, named respectively *Content, New Audiences,* and *Public Program*, each affiliated with a museum department. Every group was composed of three external members and three internal museum team members, among whom a project leader was identified. This person was responsible for facilitating communication between the group and the museum, overseeing ongoing projects, and managing administrative tasks, particularly regarding event production assignments.

Fig.1. *Art Club Presentation*, June 2021. At the event, participants were invited to collectively map out needs and proposals regarding Museion's mandate.

The Content group collaborated with the Curatorial Department, focusing on developing a program that integrates critical reflection around ongoing exhibitions through various formats such as discussions, film screenings, or performances, to name a few. The New Audiences group was paired with the Education and Public Services Department. Their mandate involved designing formats that explore the intersection between art and language. While the Public Program group, in collaboration with the Museion Events Manager, was tasked with engaging with existing artistic programs, fostering synergies with cultural actors in the region, and curating exhibition openings.

Once the tasks and collaborations for each group were defined, Art Club members were free to develop their own programs autonomously and independently. The selected members used the first six months' meetings, from October 2021 to February 2022, to get acquainted with each other and conduct research and discussions aimed at developing a proposal for the biennial events calendar. The museum provided freedom for the groups to operate independently and experiment with new formats. However, communication and information exchange were often complex due to the new and evolving nature of these procedures. The three groups always worked independently: despite expressing interest in cooperation on several occasions, the museum pushed for pursuing diversity in proposals instead. Each of the three groups thus developed its own program in early 2022, and the first events took place starting from the spring. Periodically, the Director provided suggestions to the Project Leaders, having an overall overview of the activities: in some cases, these proposals were integrated and developed further, while in other instances, they were explored differently. In the following pages, the formats defined by each group will be clearly defined.

4.2.1. *Public Program: #Occupy Museion*

Tasked with strengthening deeper connections with the local creative community, the Public Program team brainstormed different approaches. They explored ideas such as cultural trails, community-building initiatives, and even the concept of "museum occupation" during exhibition transition periods (Appendix: Castagna, 201), which are the only times when the galleries remain vacant throughout the year. The idea of museum occupation was an attempt to redefine public perception and use of the museum space, encouraging visitors to reclaim the museum through a series of collaborative events. This format sought to radically challenge the role and boundaries of the museum in an open dialogue with citizens. However, for safety reasons, the proposal was not approved by the museum, and the title "Occupy" was subsequently associated with another project.

In August 2022, the group curated a twelve-hour DJ set featuring independent techno and electronic music collectives active in South Tyrol. Hosted in front of Museion, on the Talvera meadows, the city park adjacent to the museum, the event intertwined music with discussions on the role of local creative communities and the use of public space. Based on the overwhelmingly positive audience engagement and attendance, the director van der Heide proposed extending the same format to all exhibition openings. *Occupy* (Fig.2–3.) thus

Fig. 2–3. *The Sun's Origin*, May 5, 2023. On the occasion of the opening of the *Me, We* exhibition by Japanese artist Shimabuku, the Public Program group has organized an underground electronic music evening with Japanese artists DJ Sodeyama and Anri.

became the umbrella term encompassing the clubbing events organized by the group to promote and showcase the electronic music scene. These events regularly attract thousands of participants per night, drawing not only those already involved in the underground scene but also curious individuals who find something previously lacking in the cultural offerings of the local area.

4.2.2. *New Audiences: Museion Factory*

The New Audiences group, assigned with investigating the connection between body and language, joined an ongoing research within the Department of Public Services (Appendix: Pedrini, 196).

Its specific goal was to articulate this theme through innovative activities and practices for the 20-35 age group. This manifested in various initiatives, such as extending invitations to performer Otis Mensah for a slam poetry workshop (Fig.4.), engaging the experimental theater company Teatro de Los Sentidos (Fig.5.), and collaborating with product designer Sebastian Marbacher for a workshop on conviviality in seating arrangements. These diverse collaborations formed the basis for a new permanent format, conceived as a program of participatory artistic residencies called *Museion Factory*. Each of these workshops involves about ten selected participants who are chosen through open calls, and they are offered free participation in five days of activities. Over the course of the two-year program, numerous other professionals were invited, thereby enriching the exploration of the theme of art, body, and language through diverse perspectives stemming from a large number of practices. The activities consistently embody a profound experiential dimension, underscoring the corporeal aspect not only thematically but also through the artistic methodologies employed.

Each event is complemented by a public dinner with guest artists, prepared by local caterers, thus integrating an informal and convivial moment into the workshop experiences. Through this approach, the New Audiences group endeavors to cultivate opportunities for exchange and dialogue within the local creative scene. The Museion Factory program provides a wide range of offerings tailored to diverse audiences, accommodating different commitments and availability among interested participants.

Furthermore, it is worth noting how the group has actively cultivated connections with various local stakeholders and organizations. Examples include collaborations with Centaurus, the association for LGBT rights in Bolzano (Fig.6.), the local public theater, and the Faculty of Design and Arts at the local university.

Fig.4. *Spoken Word Poetry*, September 16-20, 2022. Part of the *Museion Factory* program, the participatory residency with British artist Otis Mensah explored language as a tool to address identity, existence, and coming of age. Participants collectively created a new piece of spoken word poetry, performed during the public final event.

Fig.5–6. Top: *Teatro de Los Sentidos*, November 4-8, 2022. Gabriel Hernandez Ladino, from the experimental Spanish theater company *Teatro de Los Sentidos*, led a workshop to explore the diverse expressive possibilities of body and language through sensory and playful interactions. Below: *Werk: The Intro Ball: Everyone's a 10!*, October 28, 2023. Final event of the vogueing workshop with New York artist William Briscoe. The event was organized in collaboration with the LGBT association *Centaurus*, Bolzano.

4.2.3. *Content: Beyond the Artwork*

The Content group, to which I belonged, has been tasked with curating a series of interventions related to the museum's four-year research theme, *Techno Humanities*. The team formulated a proposal focused on mental health, a discursive field previously absent from the curatorial framework. The research project, titled *Beyond the Artwork*, sought not a clinical investigation of the theme, but rather an immersive exploration through diverse artistic practices that interpret it. The research phase included aspects such as mental health of the landscape beyond the human (Guattari 1989); widespread eco-anxiety among younger generations; and connections with the local context. Despite the apparent prosperity of South Tyrol, the province has the highest suicide rate in Italy, especially among teenagers and young adults. Since this demographic constitutes the target audience of Art Club, there was a perceived urgency to create a safe environment to address and discuss this critical issue.

The group identified three main clusters to investigate the topic throughout its biennial program. These included the themes of addiction,[10] memory,[11] and belonging,[12] each of which underwent elaboration through a public event (Fig.7–12.).

Concurrently, the head of the Public Services Department and member of the Content group highlighted the longstanding relationships established by the museum with local associations operating in the mental health sector over the years. Consequently, the group opted to proactively enhance the visibility of these partnerships, which were frequently unrecognized by the museum's audience. The events thus

10 The theme of addiction was explored during the performative symposium *Opening The Pill* (17–19.11.2022). Developed as a cultural extension of ~~*Kingdom*~~ *of the Ill*, it engaged with the exhibition through a multitude of artistic practices and perspectives. Pills became a pretext for discussing the political, social, and medical potential and implications of biotechnologies in various contexts. For the development of this project, the group collaborated with the Prevention Forum, the local reference center for addiction management, already one of the museum's activity partners.

11 *forget_me_not. In praise of loss* (20.04.2023) served as the second chapter of *Beyond the Artwork*. Dedicated to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, the project expanded the discourse between physical and digital space. The theme of memory was developed by communicating its complexity through multiple dimensions: intimate, medical, social, and virtual. The lens through which the practices were analyzed remained focused on our investigation of mental health. To delve into the theme, we collaborated with Vinzenzheim, a nursing home for Alzheimer's patients, and the Patternhouse project at the Casa Basaglia psychiatric facility near Merano. Both were already partners of the museum's Public Services Department.
The event coincided with the launch of the digital platform depositary art, specifically developed by the Content Group as part of its research program together with the Dutch design studio Moniker.

12 The latest event, *Longing for Belonging* (9, 16, 24.11.2023), was developed through a series of three moments exploring the concept of home and its implications for the well-being of individuals and societies. Among the participating artists were Aitana Cordero with the participatory long performance *La Casa*, Muna Mussie with the performance *Curva Cieca*, and the writer Gianluca Didino. The project involved collaboration with local organizations such as the homeless association Dormizil and the Organization for a Solidarity World (OEW).

Fig.7. *Worlding with the Molecular*, November 19, 2022. This biohacking workshop, led by artist, researcher, and activist Mary Maggic, focused on the extraction of hormones from urine. As part of the performative symposium *Opening the Pill*, the workshop provided a practical experience and an opportunity for reflection on alternative practices and perspectives of emancipation.

facilitated collaboration with various associations and organizations active in the area, such as the Note di Classe choir, the Sozialgenossenschaft Zum Heiligen Vinzenz for Alzheimer's patients, the homeless association Dormizil, the Organization for a Solidarity World (OEW), just to name a few. Direct dialogues with these organizations allowed for the establishment of a network of relationships and exchanges with territorial stakeholders, whose voices found space in various ways through the projects curated by the group.

Fig.8–10. *Longing For Belonging*. Three dates in November 2023 dedicated to exploring the concept of belonging – whether to a body, a place, or a community. The events featured a range of formats including film screenings, collective readings, and performances. Above and in the center: A temporary seating system designed by Parasite 2.0. to engage audiences with the space during the events. Below: *La Casa* (November 24, 2023), a participatory long performance curated by Spanish artist Aitana Cordero.

Fig.11–12. *depositary.art* is a digital platform to expand the exchange with Art Club audiences. Like a kaleidoscope of unordered materials, and shared observations, the platform invites visitors to freely create loose associations, and new links across disciplines. Presented during the *forget_me_not* event in April 2023, it was developed with Studio Moniker, Amsterdam.

4.3. *Mid-Term Evaluation*

Since the beginning of the initiative, the activities proposed by Art Club attracted enthusiastic participation from the public. However, over the months, numerous structural and organizational challenges emerged. At the conclusion of the first year, in the absence of any initiative from the museum in this regard, I sought meetings to assess the situation, analyze implemented processes, and evaluate their impact on the organization. These meetings involved not only external members of Art Club but the entire project team.

The analysis presented in the following pages aims to qualify the participatory intent of the project in order to define a sustainable—and potentially replicable—model of the experience. The perspective adopted to assess the effectiveness of the Art Club project views partici-

pation as an open space for the inclusion of voices involved and as a transformative process involving the organization itself.

In documenting the ongoing developments at Museion, I drew upon detailed meeting reports and semi-structured interviews held between January and March 2023. These conversations encompassed all Art Club participants, internal and external, including those who had left the project over time. This material was crucial in reconstructing expectations, work processes, and open points of the project and can be further explored in the chapter's Appendix (p.165).

The data and information collected were examined using the systemic transformation model proposed by Leadbeater and Winhall (2020). In defining the concept of a system, they referenced the definition provided by design scholar Richard Buchanan, who described it as "a relationship of parts that work together in an organized manner to accomplish a common purpose" (2019). According to the two authors, for an innovation process to succeed over time in influencing the system itself, it is essential to consider and intervene in four fundamental factors: resource flows, power relations, relationships, and the purpose of the system. Specifically, the resource flows referred to encompass a wide range of material and immaterial assets such as money, time, knowledge, reputation, and technologies. Leadbeater and Winhall consider it crucial to understand how these resources move within a system, which ones are prioritized, and who holds decision-making power over them in order to trace their transformative impact on processes.

The second key factor is represented by the distribution of decision-making power within the system and how it influences its dynamics. This may be implicit in the organizational culture but can also be expressed through explicit directives.

The third aspect highlighted by the two authors is internal relationships. These encompass the interactions among actors within a system, the configuration of these relationships, and how they define the core values upon which the organization is built, all of which significantly impact its capacity for innovation.

Lastly, the fourth key factor is the purpose that drives the system. This refers to the focal point around which people, activities, and resources are organized. Changing the purpose of the system does not necessarily mean establishing new goals to achieve, but rather adopting alternative practices that may lead to different outcomes.

Drawing upon this framework, the analysis in the following paragraphs examines the participatory and transformative effectiveness demonstrated by Museion Art Club, using the four key factors of

systemic transformation as a lens to trace and analyze the processes. Specifically, it investigates the impact of the Art Club on the museum's organization and the economic sustainability of the initiative (*resources*); the negotiation of relationships (*power*); public engagement (*relationships*); and the innovative scope of the project (*purpose*).

4.3.1. *Resources: Impact on the Organization*

Art Club was conceived and initiated by Director van der Heide, with the support of the museum's Administrative Director and Product Manager. Affiliating the project with the events production department during its nascent phase exerted a profound influence on its agenda and mandate, emphasizing commercial effectiveness through the organization of activities and the engagement of audiences. The other members of the staff were not involved in the project's initial development but were called upon to contribute at a later stage. This approach, in several instances, led to a lack of identification with the project, exacerbated by the fact that internal member selection was not voluntary, rather, they were chosen based on their professional expertise, with a preference for individuals aged between 20 and 35 years old.

Since its initiation, Art Club has imposed more significant demands on the museum's infrastructure and personnel than initially envisaged, leading to notably challenging outcomes on various occasions. The conceptualization and development of the initiative underestimated the requisite human and financial resources necessary for the launch of such a complex and ambitious endeavor. The two monthly hours of work stipulated in the contract proved insufficient for the development of such a complex and ambitious project, necessitating many hours of overtime for the team.

Furthermore, staff members were required to adapt to new procedures and, at times, acquire new roles (Appendix: van der Heide, 169). The introduction of novel practices and methods of work necessitated changes in processes, expectations, and the operational needs of the museum. Unlike previous practices, departments began collaborating extensively to meet the demands of an extremely diverse and dense public program, necessitating different management approaches for spaces, schedules, and programs. Given the impossibility to hire new personnel, the workload was distributed among existing staff members. However, job descriptions remained unchanged despite these new demands. For example, the production manager, in addition to following all museum events, had to produce the entire Art Club calendar. This situation escalated when simultaneous production for all three groups began.

This scenario was echoed in many other departments within the organization. All invitations, contracts, and expenses had to be processed by the museum's Administrative Offices, as the Art Club neither had the economic autonomy nor the permissions to manage such procedures. Since the format's launch, the museum has experienced a 200% increase in annual contracts to process. A similar trend was observed in the Communication Department, which was tasked with managing and promoting a dense calendar of activities and events simultaneously. The influence of the new working group has had an impact not only on procedures and workload but also on inputs related to content and traditional curatorial and programming formats. These activities were suddenly confronted with an autonomous and complementary parallel program. A stimulating and productive factor, but that required adaptability and revision in pre-existing processes and working methods.

Between January and March 2023, twelve Museion staff members resigned. These departures significantly impacted external Art Club participants, who were previously unaware of the working conditions of the staff. This context served as one of the primary motivations for initiating the restructuring processes of the project. Within a few months, the museum found itself without a marketing office staff and an events manager. Additionally, many staff members had already vacated their roles within Art Club in the preceding months. All three groups experienced considerable turnover, losing one or more internal members due to the inability to reconcile project needs with their workload. These resignations reduced the museum's support for Art Club, creating uncertainty about event development and the project's future.

The absence of this support required external members to undertake additional tasks, leading to a discrepancy between the actual workload and the contracted hours, which were not reassessed in light of the circumstances. The compensation of external Art Club members at 1,000 euros per year was symbolic in comparison to the workload they were expected to manage and produce. As a potential solution, the museum suggested appointing a curator and a producer from among the external group members for each event, with an additional compensation of 1,000 euros. However, this measure proved inadequate to meet the needs of the Art Club.

4.3.2. *Resources: Economic Sustainability*

The museum decided to offer the program curated by the Art Club for free, with the goal of fostering connections with a younger audience. Since its launch, Museion has fully funded the Art Club, allocating approximately 150,000 euros annually. This budget covers both the fees for its members and the expenses required to produce the events. The entire planned budget for the museum's public program has been dedicated to and invested in the Art Club activities. On specific occasions, the groups initiated additional collaborations, such as with the Italian Ministry of Culture or the Dutch embassy, which partly supported its implementation.

The allocation of funds is intricately linked to the museum's activity calendar, demanding precise and long-range planning. Nonetheless, this process is also characterized by a notable level of uncertainty, as the actual receipt of funds is often uncertain until the last moment due to predefined deadlines for museum funds, distributed at specific times of the year, which may not always coincide with the scheduling of the Art Club. On multiple occasions, the three groups proposed consolidating budgets to develop more complex projects. However, this proposal never received the museum's support, which preferred to maintain independence between the working groups.

The project has received no support from Private Founders. The director's goal of establishing a *culture of giving*, (Appendix: van der Heide, 172) a best practice to support public institutions through private funding, conflicted with the complexity of Italian bureaucracy and a lasting reluctance to invest privately in the public sector. At the beginning of the project, Private Founders committed to support Art Club activities through investment in the project; however, they didn't fulfill this commitment.

4.3.3. *Power: Hierarchies in the Relationships*

During the first year of activities, the lack of a clear definition of roles and relationships between Art Club and the museum led to significant misunderstandings. Initially hired as consultants to suggest proposals for the development of the public program, external members were quickly involved in all stages of processes, including managing relationships with guests and suppliers, drafting press releases, and even producing events themselves, a task originally intended for the events production department. Over the months, they were also invited to take on a much more central role in defining and interpreting the Art Club project itself. While some welcomed this involvement, many others felt uncomfortable participating in processes that were beyond their professional expertise.

During this period, Art Club members encountered challenges in directly communicating with the museum staff, and the clear division

between different working groups impeded exchanges within the project. Although the Project Leaders were tasked with facilitating these processes and maintaining an open channel of dialogue among the people, the rigidity of this model resulted in a sense of isolation among the various working groups, which largely operated autonomously, developing disconnected programs.

The economic pressures exerted on the project by the museum exacerbated these difficulties. During the first year, Art Club was primarily tasked with meeting the museum's needs and deadlines without being able to discuss how these processes unfolded. Due to the financial investment, the museum pursued event production strategies aimed at ensuring successful outcomes. On multiple occasions, groups were asked to reduce the risk of unforeseen outcomes in favor of projects that would appeal to the public. Additionally, time constraints and the need for quick results led to decisions aligned with established practices, thereby negating the transformative potential brought by the project. There was a lack of willingness and openness to allow this new initiative to find its place within existing processes. While the museum initially provided a platform for connection, it later discouraged the building of a relationship and continuous exchange among project participants. Economic investments and human resources were instead maximized in project production, prioritizing the executive aspect of the experience. The civic mandate of a participatory forum for exchange and shared discussion failed when Art Club members, called upon to contribute to a collective project, found themselves unable to do so (Appendix: van der Heide, 171).

4.3.4. *Relationships: Communities*

The three groups worked to develop relevant and innovative formats, suggesting a calendar of activities complementary to those already scheduled by the museum. The results of these new processes became promptly apparent, with several events curated by Art Club being among the most well-attended initiatives of the year. During the first year, the Art Club curated and produced twelve events, attracting approximately 6,000 attendees, while in the second year there were sixteen events with over 10,000 participants. The public's engagement underscored a clear demand for venues fostering community- and identity-building, responding positively to the array of formats and activities offered by Art Club.

At the outset, one of Director van der Heide's aims was to enhance connections with the local community, particularly by engaging a young and creative audience. The intention was to provide them with a platform and become a recognizable hub, thus effectively highlighting the museum's social and civic role in meeting the needs of its community. Already after one year of activity, a significant change was noted: event participation increased by 30% compared to previous years, with many audiences showing interest in and approaching the museum for the first time (Appendix: Ferretti, 181). This growth also coincided with an increase of 20% in exhibition visits. Although it is not yet possible to definitively determine the cause-and-effect relationship of these short-term results, these data are certainly encouraging. New analytical tools have been implemented by the team to understand the impact of these relationships on long-term public engagement, particularly regarding the age group between 20 and 35 years, which often includes individuals residing in Bolzano only temporarily for study or work reasons.

Moreover, Art Club worked to expand its network of connections with local stakeholders. In addition to the various associations and organizations mentioned in previous paragraphs, with whom the groups collaborated to strengthen relationships and amplify their perspectives and needs, the initiative also involved the communities to which the various Art Club members are affiliated. For example, the work of the Public Program group has created a strong connection with the underground music scene. Normally part of a subculture, this community has found in Museion the support of an institution willing to share a platform and support its production, both during *Occupy* events at the opening of exhibitions and through the museum's research projects, such as the *Techno* exhibition.

The university community of students from the Faculty of Design and Arts has also strengthened its connection with the museum by being actively involved on multiple occasions. In particular, both the New Audiences group and the Content group have established a long-term collaboration with them, commissioning some students for the final installations of artist residencies and involving them in the development of specific formats, such as the poster-action throughout the city for *Opening the Pill* in November 2022 or the design of the immersive visual setting for *forget_me_not* in April 2023. This approach aims to provide professional development opportunities and facilitate their integration into the local creative community. Some of them have subsequently been contacted by the museum for new collaborations and were invited to apply as members for the formation of Art Club 2.

The absence of a clearly defined initial communication campaign, however, has hindered efforts to reach a wider and more diverse audience. The launch of the Art Club coincided with a substantial

turnover in the museum's communication department, which at that time lacked a clear project for positioning Art Club externally (Appendix: Ferretti, 182). This gap remained unresolved in the following two years: although the public is aware of the existence of an autonomous working group, they often fail to establish a direct connection between it and its initiatives, which are erroneously attributed in a generic manner to the museum. Despite efforts invested in promoting events through both print and digital media, the multitude of initiatives simultaneously proposed by the institution and the uniformity of its graphic design do not facilitate the organizers' understanding of individual activities. Furthermore, institutional communication channels are often perceived as distant by a younger audience, which tends to learn about activities through informal word-of-mouth from participants and friends.

4.3.5. *Scope: Radicality in Programming*

The initial months of Art Club production reaffirmed the museum's traditional structures. The programming of the group was developed within the framework of the hosting institution without exploring or challenging its mandate. External members of the project accepted the museum's procedures without questioning them, viewing them as unalterable assumptions. Throughout the first year, efforts were directed towards formalizing established formats. Issues that arose were often regarded as unavoidable conditions by staff members and were not subject to reevaluation, questioning, or alternative negotiation. The agreed-upon formats, such as symposia, workshops, or performances, conformed to the expectations of a contemporary art museum and could have been realized, with adequate staff, even without the need to establish an autonomous body. For most participants, the freedom to shape program content and the positive audience response to activities were deemed satisfactory, and there was no perceived need for greater scrutiny of operational methods.

The potential emerging from the friction resulting from the encounter between an institution and an autonomous working group within it was not explored in this phase, marking a significant missed opportunity. This experience was, in fact, unprecedented in its prominence. The working group reacted to the urgency of producing and delivering results without delving into the profound significance of this symbiotic relationship. In doing so, they missed the opportunity to consider how the radical nature of the project might not necessarily align with the museum's objectives but could still have a significant impact on renegotiating processes, relationships, and proposed content.

4.3.6. *Intermediate discussion*

Despite the participatory, civic, and transformative intentions that characterized the inception of Art Club, one year into the project, it has evolved into a conventional format compared to its original objectives. Referring back to the model developed by Charles Leadbeater and Jennie Winhall, none of the four key factors for change served as a catalyst for systemic transformation within the organization following the introduction of the participatory experience. While the institution invited a selection of young professionals to collaborate, there was no open discussion on the proposed formats. Instead, the project's development was exclusively directed towards meeting the institution's own needs. The original vision of creating a forum with local creative communities was compromised to fit within the constraints of an existing economic model. This reinforced the disparities between the museum's hierarchical structure and the independent working group. Power dynamics remained unaddressed and were further entrenched by established methodologies for managing communication, content selection, and activities. The museum, operating within a closed and bureaucratic system, failed to embrace true openness to exchange, reinforcing verticality in relations between management and Art Club. There was a reluctance to experiment with the project's potential, opting instead for safe and familiar solutions. The focus was primarily on production, with little consideration for long-term impact. The economic and human investment sustained was thus entirely directed towards production. While the project succeeded in increasing audience numbers, this success was purely quantitative and lacked demonstrable long-term effects. There was no plan to evaluate the project's outcomes over time or in relation to the local community.

The members' recognition of these dynamics prompted a pause in event production and the formation of a working group to reevaluate the project's objectives and dynamics. In the following section, I will outline the strategies employed to tackle these issues by intervening in the processes.

4.4. *New Beginning: Restructuring Art Club*

From October 2023 to January 2024, a voluntary task force consisting of five external members and four internal museum staff members met weekly with the objective of reorganizing the Art Club structure. Representatives from all groups were included, along with the director, the head of business development, the event manager, and the head of events technician. No previous participants from the museum team made themselves available to participate in this

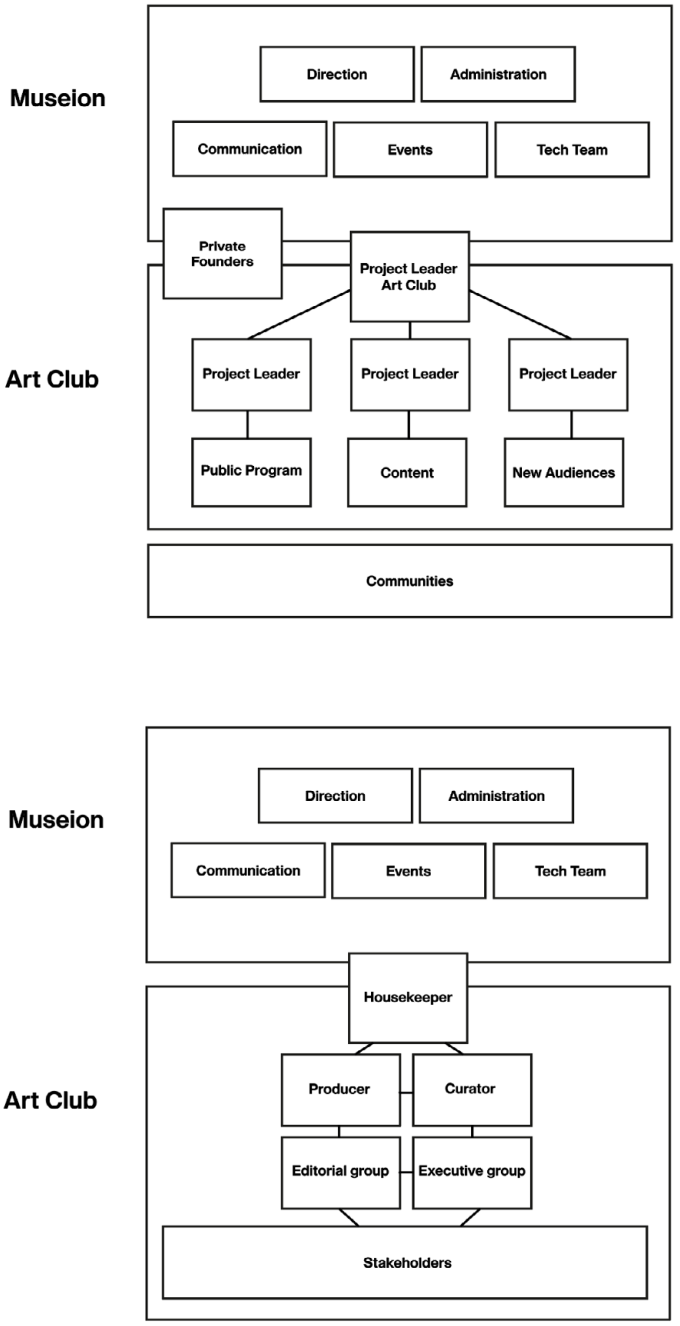

Fig. 13–14. Top: The first diagram represents the original structure of Art Club as it was practically implemented during the first year and a half of activities. Below: The second diagram illustrates the new structure of Art Club following the revision of the model negotiated with the museum and presented in spring 2024.

restructuring phase, confirming with this decision to the external members of the Art Club the workload burden on the staff.

Initially, the meetings focused on building cohesion within the group and aligning participants' perspectives to enable joint action for change. Through dialogue, exchange, and open discussion regarding needs, reference models, and project values, a shared ground was established for all participants in the processes. Sharing visions regarding the future of Art Club highlighted the social nature of working together, aiming to engage in dialogue with various organizations active in the area and foster synergies in the encounter of diverse practices.

An extension of the contract for external members was agreed upon with the museum for an additional six months until spring 2024 (later extended further until October 2024) to complete the transformation process and transition with the new working group. The planning of new events was temporarily paused in favor of a collective restructuring process.

Despite the museum's formal expression of support for change, practical difficulties arose in deviating from its traditional operational methods. Staff members attending the meetings tended to adopt a passive role, primarily listening rather than actively engaging in dialogue or supporting potential solutions. This lack of cohesion within the museum team posed a significant obstacle to the transformation process, as it was unclear which individuals could be relied upon. This led to substantial inertia in work processes, with a considerable amount of effort focused on overcoming organizational resistance.

Through the discussions, the group identified the urgency regarding three unresolved aspects. Firstly, the group worked to identify new forms that would foster exchange and dialogue with a wider audience. The original intention with the launch of Art Club was to make the museum a hub and platform for the diverse voices of the community. Therefore, the group promoted the consolidation of an active and engaged community revolving around the Art Club and its activities. This led to the redefinition of the structure of Art Club to facilitate an open, meaningful, and horizontal exchange between the museum and the autonomous working group.

Secondly, through meetings and discussions, both Art Club and the museum became aware of the radical nature of their relationship. For the museum, this involved recognizing the project as a new fundamental asset within its structure. Participation and discussion on programming constituted a productive exchange, where the content and formats explored by the Art Club team enriched and influenced other activities of the museum. Simultaneously, for external partici-

pants, the experience went beyond merely scheduling events; it involved questioning the value and significance of this symbiotic relationship at the institution's threshold and collaboratively constructing a community engaged in dialogue.

The third aspect addressed by the working group was the development and strengthening of Art Club's identity. This was important both to provide a clear profile to the public and to define the intentions and mandate of the project more clearly to its participants. This aspect was addressed by establishing new relationships with external partners for the communication and sharing of ongoing processes. These three aspects will be further explored in the following pages.

4.4.1. *Being a Community*

To enhance community-building processes, the group revitalized the initial concept of a forum accessible to a wider audience beyond the nine members of the Art Club. The group aimed to embrace a diversity of representatives from the local public and communities to intercept and incorporate their different needs, visions, and ideas, reaching out also to peripheral experiences in the regional valleys and artistic practices that were not yet represented in the museum's activities. To facilitate broader community engagement and collaboration with stakeholders, the group introduced a new format called *Town Hall Meetings*. These meetings are open to the public, museum staff, Art Club members, stakeholders, and Museion Private Founders. Through collective decision-making processes, participants openly share and discuss themes, ideas, and research directions. This inclusive

Fig.15. *Town Hall Meeting*, April 11, 2024. Through an open call, Art Club members invited those interested in becoming part of the initiative to join and share their questions and ideas.

Fig.16-17. During the *Town Hall Meeting*, with the assistance of guest artist Callum Bowden, participants were involved in a Live Action Role-Playing (Larp) session. The activity, a simulation of the Art Club experience, enabled participants to directly engage with the commitment of membership.

format allows everyone to contribute their perspectives and ideas to ongoing research projects. If a proposal from these meetings is selected, the proposer is invited to actively collaborate in its implementation, working alongside Art Club members to develop and execute the idea.

The group has scheduled four Town Hall Meetings annually, held every three months, to foster continuous dialogue and community engagement, aiming to establish the recognizability of the format. The first meeting, in April 2024, provided an opportunity to invite and select new members for the second edition of Art Club.

4.4.2. *Reviewing the Structure*

In revising the Art Club's structure, the primary goal was to streamline its organization, reducing barriers between stakeholders and fostering collaboration. Additionally, the objective was to alleviate the workload on museum staff. Through negotiations between external participants and museum personnel, the project underwent a redefinition, resulting in a reorganization of the Art Club in different aspects.

Firstly, the previous division into three groups was replaced with a single working group, which operates in two modes: editorial and executive. The editorial mode, consisting of eight external participants and three rotating Museion members, focuses on core operational tasks such as defining research themes, organizing Town Hall Meetings, and appointing curators and producers for events. Within this mode, there are two sub-groups: a Senior Group comprising four Art Club Mentors and a Junior Group composed of the four members of the Executive Team selected for the biennial period. This transition process allows for the gradual integration of new members while providing mentorship and support. While the editorial group primarily focuses on conceptualization, the executive group is responsible for event development and production. All participants in the Town Hall Meetings can be part of this second group, where they are hired to curate or produce specific projects.

To further alleviate the workload on museum staff, a new role called the *Housekeeper* has been established. This position assumes responsibilities previously managed by Project Leaders but improves communication, facilitates exchange, and provides an overview of all processes. The Housekeeper acts as the main point of contact for all communications, collaborates closely with the Event Manager, oversees deadlines and assignments, participates in museum meetings, and supervises decisions regarding event communication. This role is funded equally by museum funds and funds allocated to Art Club and is held by an external personal.

Additionally, Museion has reaffirmed its support for the project by engaging in open dialogue with various departments. The Event Manager, the Head of Events Technician, and Communications Manager of the museum work closely with Art Club, in coordination with the Housekeeper.

Despite the more intricate involvement of individuals, the revised structure (Fig.13–14.) allows for varying levels of participation based on participants' interest and availability. While maintaining a compact core operational group, the extended Forum and voices of territorial stakeholders are given significant space and representation.

4.4.3. *Enhancing Communication*

To significantly enhance the public's understanding of Art Club, the working group has addressed several aspects. Firstly, they established a more unified perspective of the project among its members. Through targeted discussions and exercises, the group clarified its mission, vision, values, tone of voice, positioning, and audience. To define the core values underlying the reorganization of Art Club, the group referenced models from similar institutions and studied radical ideologies based on grassroots practices, such as the (under)commons, Solidarity, and Trust. These movements advocate the sharing of models that promote solidarity and peer-to-peer relationships to develop new production methods. Additionally, they introduce alternative exchange models beyond traditional economic value, creating a value scale in production that transcends simple quantitative measurements. The characteristics outlined for the reorganization of Art Club have also defined a clear agenda for the museum's operations.

Secondly, efforts have been made to incorporate new assessment tools capable of evaluating the impact of activities offered, moving beyond solely relying on quantitative metrics. Throughout 2024, social designer Sven Kammerer will collaborate with all Art Club initiatives to develop a set of tools facilitating diverse evaluations, which will then be integrated into museum practices. Among the parameters under scrutiny for field research is project sustainability, indicating its capacity to continually benefit the communities it engages with. This aspect directly correlates with community involvement, assessing the extent to which the project engages and empowers individuals within the community by ensuring their voices are acknowledged and respected in decision-making processes. The research will also examine the project's ability for innovation and adaptability to changes, concurrently learning from errors, addressing new challenges, and improving over time.

Furthermore, efforts have been made to expand the dissemination of Art Club activities to a broader and more diverse audience by diversifying communication channels beyond reliance solely on social media platforms. This initiative includes increased visibility in the local press to introduce audiences outside the primary target demographic to Art Club and to underscore the museum's civic significance within cultural, social, and political spheres.

Moreover, an enduring partnership has been established with CheFare,[13] a cultural transformation agency based in Milan, specialized

13 https://che-fare.com/chi-siamo-chefare-agenzia-trasformazione-culturale/

in providing training programs and strategic support pathways. Their initiatives assist communities, cultural entities, institutions, and governmental bodies in addressing ambitious cultural, social, and political challenges through design methodologies. A series of articles will be periodically featured on the organization's digital platform throughout 2024, laying the groundwork for a book intended to critically examine and disseminate the model developed with Art Club. The release of this publication is scheduled for autumn 2025.

An official presentation of Art Club 2 has been scheduled for autumn 2024 (October 16, 2024), coinciding with the conclusion of the tenure of Group 1. On this occasion, a public event will be organized to introduce the new working group to the audience. Concurrently, a dedicated symposium will be convened, inviting delegates from other museum institutions to analyze and discuss the theme of participation. The symposium aims to examine Art Club as a case study, its peculiarities, objectives and investigating potential collaborations within a museum context.

Discussion and further steps

The processes described in these pages have been marked by an intense exchange of ideas. They have also been characterized by significant difficulties in producing a meaningful impact on the museum's structure, which has shown strong resistance to change. While the initial impact on the organization can be attributed to inadequate preliminary planning, efforts have been made subsequently to achieve an impact more in line with the desired objectives. Referring back to Leadbeater and Winhall's model, at the conclusion of these new revision processes, all four parameters—resources, power, relationships, and purpose—have been mobilized. Although the developed format provides a temporary response within ongoing processes, the new structure of Art Club manages to establish a permanent and productive channel for public participation at Museion. Through representation of the public that mediates processes, broad communities are engaged, and their contributions find voice and space in the production of the museum's public program activities. Simultaneously, a format has been found to productively enhance dialogue between the public and the museum, without exhausting the workforce or drastically altering the structure, but rather defining an equitable and significant space in the organization for the role of the public.

Art Club distinguishes itself from other initiatives with similar participatory objectives by implementing a structured format aimed at fostering a continuous and enduring relationship and dialogue between the museum and its audience. This structure ensures that participation, collaboration, and co-design are not just scaffolded activities. Rather than yielding contributions in isolation, their emergence is the result of sustained processes of negotiation and dialogue among diverse stakeholders. These processes necessitate dedication, transparency, a substantial investment of time and resources, and designing with the uncertainty of outcomes. However, they are reinforced by the support of a cohesive and engaging community and ensure that the contributions and outcomes generated are recognized as meaningful and beneficial by both the participating audience and the hosting museum.

The processes also entail continuous transgression of individual disciplinary boundaries in favor of situated and multidisciplinary knowledge emerging from mutual exchange. Art Club's collaboration with the museum fosters a community of practice that, united by a shared mandate, seeks and discusses solutions to address the needs of its diverse participants. In this context, the museum becomes a relevant and valued space within the community, offering itself as a platform for discussions pertinent to its members. As evidence of the effectiveness of this model, several institutions and organizations—such as the Triennale di Milano, Basis Vinschgau Social Activation Hub, Biennale di Fortezza, to name a few—have already approached Art Club and Museion seeking guidance on how to export this model elsewhere. While the economic, organizational, and workforce conditions facilitating the implementation of the project at Museion may not be replicated identically elsewhere, the example set by this experience nonetheless offers a valuable contribution. It serves as a useful starting point for initiating broader changes and encourages critical reflection that extends beyond the specificity of any single institution.

From this perspective, the project has underscored the imperative to redefine and negotiate the methods, structure, and practices of museums to integrate participatory processes into their traditional activities. In the case of Museion, the absence of this preliminary step had a significant impact on the organization, affecting the project's success. Substantial change necessitates questioning and revising the traditional form of the museum. This does not entail a complete renovation of the museum's mission but rather involves identifying suitable spaces capable of accommodating this encounter productively. At Museion, these processes primarily impacted the public program, allowing for the inclusion of alternative experiences beyond those of the museum staff. However, in other contexts, this transformation may manifest differently.

Another crucial aspect that has surfaced from the analysis and requires clarification pertains to the contextualization of the role of the public. Throughout this research, I often allude to specialized publics, although not explicitly stated. Even within the framework of Art Club, practitioners from various disciplinary backgrounds are involved in organizing the public program. While their expertise facilitates connections and ensures outcomes aligned with the museum's expectations, the overarching aim is to gradually broaden the public in a more heterogeneous manner.

As Zardini clearly stated, the audience is not an abstract concept but rather something that each institution, through its agenda, should strive to attract (Appendix: 230). From this perspective, Museion has succeeded in bringing representatives from previously underrepresented disciplines into the museum, thereby engaging their respective communities of practice. Initially, the museum primarily entered into dialogue with a specialized audience, but as Art Club progressed, its reach expanded to encompass broader audiences through a variety of projects, themes, formats, and approaches.

Facilitating these engagements necessitated significant time, consistent effort, and the establishment of a recognizable presence to enable various audience segments to genuinely engage with or relate to the project. It is imperative to maintain a non-elitist attitude and convey an impression that the threshold is open to diverse contributions and audiences. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that direct participation in processes demands ongoing commitment, which may not necessarily appeal to all segments of the public.

This reevaluation entails a deeper examination of the design tools at my disposal and a reconsideration of the expectations towards my practice. Throughout the extensive duration of the project, spanning over two and a half years, I found that rigid adherence to my previous practices was insufficient in articulating and codifying the work undertaken. The conventional 'toolbox' provided by my education and professional training proved insufficient in addressing the encountered challenges. This limitation did not stem from a lack of potential contributions of design to the ongoing processes but rather from the traditional mindset with which I initially approached the context.

NEW STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION: A DESIGN PROPOSAL

Conclusions

Challenging the Status Quo

This research was driven by two interconnected questions: How can the fundamental assumptions about participation in contemporary museums be redefined? And: How can design contribute to re-articulate participation in the museum? The answers develop out of a set of observations and result in a specific proposal that not only ascribes a new role to the visitor but also intervenes in the institutional structure of the museum.

The analysis has outlined how participation, coherently adopted, implies a continuous renegotiation of objectives, conventions, and responsibilities of the traditional museum. If it aims to develop a lasting relationship with its audience beyond marketing or education, it has to render its institutional structure accessible. Entrenched procedures and hierarchies tend to be highly resistant to change. Thus, having a theoretical understanding of participation does not automatically solve the practical challenges associated with its implementation.

It was, therefore, essential to extend the research beyond the existing literature and include a practical experience in a two-fold way: The mapping of international institutions collected methods that allowed participants to exert specific influence on the institution. These examples do not radically change the existing structure of the museum; its traditional roles—director, curator, conservator—are not redefined. However, the staff manages a permanent exchange with their public audience. While participation usually remains sporadic and confined to 'by-invitation-only' activities, these institutions opened up spaces— physical, virtual, or metaphorical—that foster continuous interactions with the public. This requires a continuous commitment of every participant: staff, funders, and stakeholders. Together they have to reimagine operational modes to include contributions from people outside the institution. It also challenges the intellectual authority of the museum's representatives: Knowledge is no longer an available resource to be distributed by the specialists; it is to be produced dialogically in a shared process.

Furthermore, this thesis traces a practice-based research project in collaboration with Museion in Bolzano. This project established a collaboration among stakeholders, the public, and museum staff by questioning and re-defining the museum's public events. The

research of this thesis initiated an organizational transformation guided by design inquiry, challenging deeply ingrained assumptions, and co-creating an actual participatory and collaborative project named Art Club.

The concept of *communities of practice* is crucial here. It works against the traditional understanding of a homogeneous public to be addressed through the universal knowledge inscribed into the institution. It also forces us to acknowledge a pre-existing, specific knowledge that enters discourse. Events and exhibitions become *platforms* to activate these different kinds of social knowledge, and they lose their character as mediators of previously accumulated knowledge of experts. Every community of practice is a kind of archive and every visitor of the museum is an archivist. The practice, which we can identify as belonging to the museum, is no longer restricted to the architectonic space. It is a practice exercised as part of cultural production. Museums have to focus on these existing practices of specific communities more than on their own knowledge. This exercise of knowledge production with and across communities of practice is not without conflict and can result in discussions on controversial and socially relevant aspects, questioning the procedures and the mandate of the museum, or in renegotiating political issues at stake. The examples analyzed in the preceding chapters show how participation can manifest in various ways, a diversification that proves effective in strengthening the connection between the museum and its audience. Within this redefined context, the museum accepts its civic and social mandate and renegotiates the distribution of power in the institution.

For a Wider Perspective

Over time, these transformations will increasingly require museums to integrate a wider range of professional competencies. While museums still recruit their staff primarily aligned with their traditional departments, the ongoing changes indicate a need for reevaluation of the professional roles. New functions of the institution demand new types of expertise and personnel. This aspect has been underscored in numerous discussions throughout this research and extends beyond the confines of the museum itself, intersecting with museum education. It necessitates a restructuring of the training provided to these professionals. Lev Bratischenko (Appendix: 241) from the CCA in Montreal described himself as a "trouble maker," referring to his development of unconventional activities that transgress the boundaries between departments. Fabio Viola has stressed the importance of new expertise for establishing and sustaining new types of museums (Appendix: 334).

At Museion, Art Club project prompted the staff to readjust their practices to meet the needs of a participatory experience.

At the same time, museums must also establish new criteria to assess the outcomes of participation. It is imperative to address the issue of measuring the long-term effects of participation on museums, and the communities they serve beyond mere numerical metrics. The ongoing research at Museion, outlined in Chapter 4, tries to tackle this complex issue, although definitive results are pending. Nevertheless, to find new forms of assessment seems crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the social value and impact of participatory practices.

A Revised Practice

This study underlines how the designers have to answer the complexity of the contemporary with an increasing sophistication and awareness in their research. This implies the transcending of traditional disciplinary boundaries to generate critical, and situated knowledge. While design projects by tradition follow a technical-scientific perspective, and a problem-solving approach, design-research today proposes different strategies, which have been directed towards socio-political issues, and an interrogation of underlying assumptions. The reframing of design as a fundamental element in all forms of organizations has significantly altered both the approach and the tools of design-practice. In my collaboration with Museion, I did not work as a distant consultant, but I was collaboratively involved in the redefining of structures and could thus participate in negotiating conditions. Although the formats developed there require further testing, their success lies in fostering a discursive practice that addresses the needs of all parties involved.

One of the objectives of this research has been to deconstruct conventional concepts of participation in museums and provide alternative meanings, their social and cultural value, and the reality they produce. Integrating a speculative approach into service design processes ensures that transformations are not addressed solely as problems of the present but are instead incorporated into future-oriented alternative scenarios. The speculative animation *Morphosis* elucidates the hidden structures concerning the participating actors and processes, facilitating critical discussions and debates. For the first time presented at Museion's inaugural Town Hall Meeting in April 2024, the animation inspired a collective debate on a permanent space for Art Club within the museum. Subsequent discussions envisioned desirable as well as feasible futures regarding the establishment of participatory spaces. In this way, the animation assumed political

significance by generating alternative representations and introducing a deviation from convention.

The metaphorical reconfiguration of phenomena makes hidden assumptions tangible, changes experience, and reshapes their knowledge. In this sense, re-designing and articulating new representations of specific issues actively contribute to their (re-)construction, opening up spaces for dialogue and debate. This is a major challenge for designers today: to deal with complexity without oversimplifying, even when problems are not instantly solvable.

Museion Interviews

Appendix #1

Bart van der Heide
Director of Museion and initiator of the Art Club project

GC It is a very significant moment for museums: in 2019, there was the failure to reformulate the definition by the ICOM committees, and in the two and a half years leading up to August 2022, museums have had an intense period of reflection with respect to their future.

BVDH The context of the ICOM definition is very important to me, since I consider myself a museum professional, and I have always worked in the public sector. This identity crisis is not something you particularly experience on the level of exhibitions, but you really see it on the level of organisation. What this discussion — or this polarisation — in the definition of museums was about was two camps that did not find a compromise at all. On one side, there was a traditional definition of museum in terms of conservation and education, basically defined through visitor numbers, blockbuster exhibitions, and through being more accessible to a broader audience.

On the other side, a more recent understanding of the museum through an agonistic approach. This is characterised by different opinions and bringing people together. It's about discussion and communality. What you see is two completely different understandings of democracy and accessibility. The first, through the number of visitors and broad access to exhibitions to a wide audience. The second is very much related to the diversity of the debate. As a museum professional, I think a museum is neither one nor the other. I think a museum is both. I don't understand why you can't create museums that integrate both aspects: an exhibition- and collection-centred approach and an agonistic approach, like a civic platform. Both models alone are, for me, unsatisfactory. Also, in my opinion, Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistics is not fully applicable in relation to museums. Just to become an agonistic platform, where the discussion is the only priority, is not good enough. We have a role, and we are not an open platform.

Museums are always defined by the people, but they are a very delicate infrastructure. A museum is a moment of cohabitation, of specialisation, and of civic engagement. The museum is where the coexistence of people takes place, people who work there and who are highly specialised, and we need to be proud of that. Obviously, with every form of specialisation, there is a level of hierarchy. Museums also need to provide vision, need to stand for something, and to give direction. You need to really tap into the expertise of what you have: you need to be proud of that.

I really try to implement a vision in which the museum is more than the sum of its exhibitions, and this vision is a way to express the field of specialised specialists. Museums are moulding formats in which

we are functioning and creating a civic responsibility. Of course, it depends on the context. Making a museum in Bolzano/ South Tyrol is completely different from making a museum in Abu Dhabi. Each time a museum adapts to the changing community around itself. The exchange needs to start with acknowledging what you have and what your quality is.

GC How are these considerations reflected in the work you do in Museion?

BVDH What is important for me is that the impact of Museion is more than the sum of its exhibitions. It is not about either the one understanding of the ICOM or the other, it's about both. We continue building an international profile through our exhibitions, and this unfolds through a more hierarchical path, which is done by curators — either guests, or internal curators, or me. This path is about specialisation and research into the collection. Art Club was specifically established to foster a more urban culture in South Tyrol as a greenhouse for talent and professionalisation, specifically from this age group. It is working as an autonomous forum. When we make decisions, we invite the young creative sector of this territory between the ages of 20 and 35.

As a third format, we have the *Academy*. This is developed through various collaborations and media support: we have the Bulletin, the Passage, the Lifelong Learning, as well as the academic partnerships and the long term research line on Techno Humanities. These are all different activities, but what is important is that we are connecting with the local territory. For example with the Passage, the aim is to show our collection free of charge on the ground floor of the museum. The content is always linked to the territory, and it generates a contemporary narrative. We are more like editorials and editors ourselves.

A similar process happens with the *Bulletin*: the museum is not the standard of expertise, but we are also allowing or giving voice to other expertise in the territory who curated each issue. These new formats provide a shared understanding of expertise: Museion no longer holds exclusive expertise nor sets the standard on its own. What is very revolutionary is that the museum now perceives its expertise as in constant dialogue with local or global partnerships. We make sure that in moments of decision, the people we have exchanged ideas with are also around the table with us. That is how I translate this post-colonial discourse: not only in programming but very much on an organisational level. I think this is a point where often international museums fail. For a decade, post-colonial discourse already had a big influence on museum practice, but the impact is visible only on the level of programming; the organisations remain the same. What I want to do is also to let this post-colonial strategy have an impact on our organisation. Art Club, the collaborations at the Passage, or the long term research programme on Techno Humanities are all not only part of the programme but also active tools to challenge the way we work and the way we set the standard of working.

GC Did Art Club have an impact on the structures and ways of working of the museum, particularly in its different departments?

BVDH Yes. There have been comparisons between our organisation and the Art Club groups in terms of time and procedures, deadlines, assignments, payment, all these aspects. These discrepancies had an incredible impact on the organisation because they brought new forms of discussions. We were confronted with new situations and we needed to find solutions. Various questions arose, such as: Do we really stick to our procedures or could we remodel them? And: how fixed are we in our regulations? Many of these constraints arise because we are a public institution tasked with managing public funds. However, these limitations also signify the existence of a museum, an organization capable of implementing changes, and the financial resources we can allocate toward such endeavors. That's why both sides need to find a balance: the Art Club cannot be independent at this moment because it still depends on the mutual aid of the institution. We dedicate the time of our team, the money we have, the resources, and the dedication in terms of building the network and visibility around it, so that more and more people also understand and want to take part. When we come to a moment in which Art Club doesn't need us anymore, our work is done.

GC I have a question regarding the radicality of this action: although there is a lot of potential in the experience and its outcomes, I wonder if Museion could have done what we achieved independently anyway. Let me clarify: the proposals developed fit into a range of practices already existing in Museion. Because of the structure and because it's such a complex machine — both from a bureaucratic and financial point of view, — in a way we ended up returning to formats and structures that were the ones that you would expect from a museum. I wonder if, over time, some of our experimentation, critical thinking, and radical approaches had to be compromised in favor of feasibility.

BVDH That's a very good question. I think what we are doing is extremely radical, even though maybe the formats that the production ends up with are more conventional. But what Art Club has achieved is completely changing the culture of the organisation. There's a growing realization that decisions are not solely made by us, but that there are external factors beyond the confines of our organization, beyond the museum team's bubble. I think a museum, as an organisation, is a template of the society we want to create. It is also about shaping a society for a future that always starts with the team itself. We need to practise what we preach. If we are able to

change the dynamic of a little organisation of a museum — comprised of 35 people, — we already make the first step in changing the society as a whole. If people understand that a museum organisation is starting to work differently, it is an incredibly radical gesture, which has an impact on how people look at the museum, and perhaps also how people see themselves reflected in it. Now, for instance, we face a challenge keeping connection with the old audience of the museum who do not feel represented in the museum anymore. It's something that shows the radicality of it.

GC Sure. I wonder how much radicality needs to be balanced.

BVDH I think to really influence the organisation, we need to do more. Since everyone is working on so many different projects at the same time, clear formats are required. That's what this organisation is able to do right now, and it's also what we have.

We don't want to exhaust people, take advantage of the resources, their loyalty, and their dedication, because that means that people will leave. Not everyone has the same ambition; there are people in the organisation that just want to go home and do not want to think of work anymore. It's really human. I think that is something that we all have to work on because we also really respect and admire the work of the staff.

I think the radicality needs to happen in the communication and the dialogue between Art Club and the museum, which is still a work in progress. Who is leading? It is still very top-down in terms of how we decide when a meeting needs to take place, when the deadline is, and how many events will happen. I think that is something very much from us to you. I have the feeling that the agency that is felt by some members of Art Club is not represented in the dialogue that we have at the moment. Fatima El Hajjaji, the event manager, played a key role in maintaining cohesion. She became the connector, adept at resolving conflicts and negotiating solutions. As the Art Club project grew in scope, tensions between the working group methodology and the museum's established practices arose, yet Fatima skillfully managed these challenges. However, our communication process failed; conflicts were relayed through Fatima rather than addressed collectively. This top-down approach drained resources.

GC This is one of the points I wanted to discuss with you: the lack of plenary meetings. We had only one large feedback meeting over this last year and a half. Have the challenge of coordinating twenty people with diverse commitments impeded the organization of these meetings?

BVDH It's also part of the work in progress. We are trying to implement new aspects. These formats need to be developed together,

and Art Club also has a role in that. Until now, the formats simply came from us. We failed in the way we created this Agora together. We only worked to realise the events. That's why I was so happy when you initiated the last meeting independently, without the museum.

GC The plan is to continue with these meetings. I think similar informal moments of feedback are important. Why, for example, when we asked on several occasions to merge the three groups was there no will to do it? Why did you think that working completely independently would be better? In my opinion, it was a failure in this project to not create more bridges. After a year and a half of work, we decided to organise such a moment of invaluable exchange ourselves.

BVDH It's never too late, because we are building something new. We started something that we did not have a best practice for, so it's totally fine if we fall and stand up. A positive aspect of partnering with a museum is that timeframes extend far beyond a single year. When dealing with cultural heritage, the focus spans decades rather than mere years. What we've accomplished in this short amount of time is remarkable, yet building something new is a prolonged endeavor. It's been a learning experience; we embarked with aspirations for institutional change but found ourselves constrained by event-focused timelines. Once we concentrate only on projects, we risk falling into conventional structures.

Actually, to be radical, we need to find a different way of interaction in which the museum understands that the decision-making process is no longer only with the team. We operate within a broader conception of the institution, extending beyond our museum's walls. This understanding is becoming increasingly entrenched, reshaping our organizational mindset. What still needs to change is how Art Club sees its role. I think only a few members perceive its full potential. Many others saw themselves more as a service; not everyone perceived the potential of this radicality.

GC It was not totally clear at the very beginning. You gave us complete freedom to imagine the public program through different formats. We have been hired to provide ideas which would later be produced by the museum. Perhaps this was the aspect that was misinterpreted: the contract leaned more towards a consultancy model. It wasn't evident the freedom to question or envision a potential future for the institution.

BVDH No, it was not clear, I agree. The roles, responsibilities, and timeframe were all unclear. However, after two years, things have become more defined. After two years that is more defined. Furthermore,

we didn't secure the funding we hoped for. Undertaking into broadening the museum's profile entails the need to expand our budget and resources. Otherwise, we're developing these two additional formats with the same team and budget in place. We can't diminish our exhibition budget to the extent that we can afford these new formats as well, thus requiring additional funding to maintain the exhibition quality and develop these new projects. That's why we have the partnership with the Private Founders, aiming to raise around 160,000 euros annually to support Art Club. My hope was to foster an exchange that wasn't only economical, but also to connect professionally the local young creative sector and the corporate industrial world.

GC But these moments of exchange were completely lacking, don't you think?

BVDH Neither in this regard did we reach our ambitions. However, what we did achieve, for instance, is more political visibility for the subculture. Art Club became the intermediary between these different professional levels, which brought young creatives out of their bubble and really encouraged them in their professionalisation and visibility.

The same happened with your work of the Content group and the performative symposium *Opening the Pill*. We offered your practice an international platform through its inclusion in the exhibition halls, which not only enhanced your professional development and visibility but also served as a stage for the types of formats you wished to explore. I think the goal of the initiative is about giving visibility, networking and space. But there is still potential in the financial and network side of what can be done and achieved through Art Club.

GC What does the fact that the Private Founders did not donate the expected money mean? Did they decide to invest differently or were they not satisfied with the results achieved over this last year and a half?

BVDH The reasons are manifold. We were not prepared for the idea that in South Tyrol there is no culture of giving. In Germany, the Netherlands, or England, raising 160,000 euros through private funding is relatively easy; however, in Italy, it's a different story. There is suspicion between the private sector and the public sector, from both sides. One aspect is that museums are not independent from politics: a change of government results in the change of all museum directors. This means that if you support a museum with private money or donate a work to a museum, you don't know what the outcome will be, because maybe in ten years the context of that museum could change completely. Another aspect is that in Italy, investors feel that they already pay so much tax that they think it should be the state's job to financially support public cultural institutions. This is an issue that is older than this initiative, and for which a special path

will have to be built, which is exactly what we are doing with the Art Club. We need to build a new mindset of giving: What is giving? What is civic engagement?

GC Does the same thing apply to Art Club participants?

BVDH You receive compensation for your role in Art Club, but it's incomparable to the value of your contributions. Financially, it may not be competitive, but there's a deeper significance in your involvement — the distinction between being a freelance programmer and engaging civically.

The same applies to members from the staff: they had to learn a completely new role, and they invested in it. We're all involved in endeavors that hold civic value beyond their financial worth. This kind of mindset still needs to completely be understood by the Private Founders: They're not giving to the museum, they're giving to Art Club, they're giving to a new format of civic engagement. However, the fundamental goal of the Art Club is to cultivate a culture of giving for long-term sustainability.

I think there is also another point that we need to solve: What are your needs? As a young professional with a particular age and level of experience, financial compensation is important, but what else do you need? Your generation feels an ethical responsibility to change things: How can you use us in order to achieve that?

GC What I've gained from this experience so far is primarily the professional network of contacts I've established with other members of Art Club, with whom I collaborate beyond Museion. However, as we've previously discussed, I've felt a lack of time for meaningful discussions on the content we aim to develop. Our planning has often been done in emergency conditions. My hope was that Museion could provide us a space dedicated to exchange and reflection.

BVDH Yes, this is the moment when reality kicks in. You also need to be aware that the culture of institutions nowadays is in a state of emergency. That is the reality. What you've witnessed might not be fully understood unless you're part of the organization. There's constant pressure, and museums struggle to plan beyond the next project, unable to foresee what lies ahead. That's why most of the museums prefer not to be transparent, to just keep up the facade as if they are in control. But this identity crisis is something that is real and has a direct impact on people.

GC This fracture is strongly perceivable: there's a desire for self-reinvention, yet museums remain entrenched in traditional structures where there's little

room for deviation. Art Club mirrors this struggle to transform an old framework into something new, facing challenges and setbacks inherent in relinquishing certain privileges. Certainly the greatest impact on the proposal was seen in the presence of the public. As far as I know, you don't have proper tools to measure the data. It's more about perception and observations made during openings. By selecting a specific age range and community of practice, did you imagine Art Club members as catalysts to attract a different audience to the museum?

BVDH Over the past 30 years, I've dedicated myself to museum work, and what continues to amaze me is their potential to foster a sense of belonging. They offer a space to land in a world increasingly dominated by the free market economy, where we're constantly churning out work, trapped in a cycle of endless production from one project to the next. Museums offer a place to ground oneself, to find rest, and discover inspiration or a sense of community through cultural heritage, forward-thinking imagination, and interdisciplinary practices. I find immense hope in the concept and organization of museums.

What I saw here in Museion, when I came the first time, is that this sense of belonging was only experienced by a very small group of people. I watched the exhibition openings, and so many people seemed to be missing, they were all the same kind of tribe. I enquired about the cultural challenges of the territory. There is, first of all, a brain drain: more people with higher education qualifications are leaving than coming to the area. And this is happening with the generation between 20 and 35 years old. Furthermore, South Tyrol has a high percentage of suicide, all around the age of 20. I wanted the museum as a space for both refuge and inspiration for this generation too. The question was how to engage that group today?

This digital native generation can only build a bond with something if they feel that it has an impact. Otherwise they are not loyal or committed to one place: one day they are committing to techno, but the next day to bungee jumping. The only way to engage this generation is to offer them a voice or the feeling that they can influence change. People we chose to be part of Art Club are part of this age group: they might have visited Museion before for single openings but not returned consistently. The moment when we give them a platform to have influence — both in the programming but also in the institutional operational side — there is a moment of alliance, in which agency is passed on to others. The idea is that you become a multiplicator of that agency. The civic organisation of Museion is no longer the building of the museum or its staff, but it's growing outside of the building, because the members of Art Club are also multiple creators, bringing their network inside. That's why we now have a new audience. For instance, the incredible core group of students of the university who are coming.

GC I partly disagree with you: I think it's more about relevance, belonging, and finding oneself within a community of shared interests and practices, rather than solely focusing on impact.

BVDH Yes, but the idea of a sense of belonging has changed. Young generations only feel that they belong somewhere if they have a voice. I come from a generation who get the feeling of belonging somewhere when a public institution plans something in which they feel mirrored and represented. I don't need a voice because these institutions represent what I stand for. Standing for something in my generation was very much defined by the expertise of the institutions. If I were 20 years old now, with all these modes of communication and digital bubbles, it would be very much about voicing. You feel that you belong somewhere if you have the feeling that you are also heard through the resonance that you create in terms of likes and followers. You only feel you belong if you think your voice has an impact.

GC Have you checked with the direct subjects if that's really the point? Community building is also highlighted in the new ICOM definition. Most of the time these impulses result in simulations of participatory processes. From this point of view, Art Club seeks a horizontal approach in some of its functions.

BVDH The horizontality is key. Museion is a group of experts. I have 30 years of experience, but the difference is that I do not tell you what you need; I see it as a dialogue between the two. Finding common ground is more and more difficult nowadays. It becomes harder and harder to really find common ground between an institution and their stakeholders. If you seek dialogue with us, I'm entirely receptive, but management isn't solely top-down; it's also bottom-up. I might be the director, but I also need to be managed by the organisation the same way as I am managing the organisation in return.It's a reciprocal relationship. Additionally, the organization must signal when they're overwhelmed. They should articulate their needs and desires so I can have an understanding of what's feasible and how to proceed.

GC This is also an aspect that proved problematic: at the beginning of the year, four staff members resigned from the museum within a short period of time. It represented a considerable loss. I don' know if the situation could have been handled differently, if the alarm was raised too late, or if there were insufficient means to resolve the issues. I don't think there is an easy answer, but so many people leaving and abandoning the project project, it's a clear signal. It was

a clear stand to slow down to survive. The resources and workforce were insufficient to pursue such an ambitious project. With the absence of these internal members, external ones were compelled to take on additional responsibilities that were necessary nonetheless.

BVDH Yes, we miscalculated the time necessary to develop the projects. You need more time to get to know each other, because that's where the solidarity starts. The beginning of design, having people around the table who do not know each other, took more time than we expected.

GC It was very difficult: having only two hours a month, we needed to arrive at a conclusion in a short period of time, and this sometimes forced some rushed choices. These are processes that require dedication and time.

BVDH In this respect I think there is a possibility for you. With the conclusion of the first generation of Art Club, you have the opportunity to trace the desired legacy and provide directions for the future. We cannot do the same thing again; the next phase should be better than this. When you organise these meetings, please focus not only on what went wrong but also how it should be.

GC This is definitely something we will do. I believe it's crucial, particularly during this experimental initial phase, to have feedback sessions that are more transparent. While you may have been comfortable disclosing all the project's challenges in front of Private Funders and the press during the Plenary Meeting, it wasn't evident to the Art Club members what was feasible and what wasn't.

BVDH That's true, but I don't have anything to be ashamed of. I'm very much aware of the situation museums are in, and I don't think we should cover that up. It shows that museums are incredibly agile and survivors. They are these incredibly intelligent organisms, always questioning and shaping themselves. They react to constantly changing societies and their direct influence. When society becomes more and more complex, the organisations become complex as well. We don't have anything to be ashamed of; if things do not work and are frustrating, that's all part of the project.

GC Did you have the chance to experiment with a format similar to Art Club in other places? How did you imagine it? I know that some of your references come

from the subculture, like the Progress Bar in Amsterdam or the Pogo Bar in Berlin.

BVDH It started when I was director at the Kunstverein in Munich between 2000 and 2015. I noticed a monoculture in terms of music. It was all disco, there was no diversity. I think a museum for contemporary art or a Kunsthalle always needs to show that there is always more than one truth. Contemporary art needs to raise awareness that one standard is not the standard of the entire world. There's so much more outside of one's own comfort zone.

I started to meet people in town who represented other types of interests, and we started new programmes with them. We started making parties, programmes on poetry, programmes on new music. I gave these people a space to organise their activities: clubbers did not have a club because the scene was monopolised by disco; the poets did not have a place to do their poetry because no one was interested in it, and the new music did not have a space because the theatres were only programming conventional concerts. These communities needed to have a space. I had the space, and I reserved money for them to have the means to start. The rest of the financing was done through ticketing. All the money that they raised was reinvested straight back into their next project, rather than going into the museum. I allowed them to completely choose their own visual communication identity for their programme. They started to autonomously programme and, through the museum's network, they were able to reach audiences they would not normally have been able to. The poetry group got Chris Kraus or John Giorno to Munich. By being affiliated with the museum, they were able to move important names and have a conversation with individuals on the same wavelength. The network and the status of the constraint also allowed them to become more ambitious and more professionalised.

They were also operating like three completely independent groups, but what was so amazing is that over time audiences started to mix. The clubbers had their audience, the poets had their audience, and the new music had their audience, but eventually the clubbers went to the poetry sessions, and the poetry people went to listen to the new music. Over time, we raised our audience commitment and memberships but also started to create a culture in which people started to look beyond their own comfort zone and started to feel connected with others.

That was a learning experience that enabled me to say: This is actually working, we can become a place where people feel at home and open to different realities. Then I went to the Stedelijk and tried to propose again the format there. But it was very difficult because of the entranced structures. In order to generate an institutional change, the established museums are not the places for it: at the moment, they are huge ships in crisis. It's impossible to really have a fundamental institutional change in museums. That will take decades to achieve and a lot of pain, a lot of conflict.

GC When visiting some museums, one can distinctly perceive this sense of disorientation...

BVDH That's why I chose a museum like Museion, which is still quite a young museum and still in the process of developing, growing, building its profile. You don't need to destroy something in order to build something new, we're all still building. For me, those places are the only places where you can explore real institutional change, without destroying something else. Museion is still not fully accepted by the community, we're still in the process of growth. I want to build an institution in which a larger group of people feel that they belong. So the building does not represent the museum anymore; it's ideally much broader. The lifespan of a museum is much longer. If you look at the Stedelijk Museum, it just had its 150th birthday. Museion instead is only 15 years old as a new building; it started in 1985, but we've only been a public private partnership since 2007. I want to involve not only my team in this experiment but also the community.

GC What is your evaluation of the first Art Club?

BVDH I think it's fantastic, I'm incredibly proud. Of course, we feel the exhaustion and the frustration, but what we've achieved is absolutely a radical change. If you look at the larger picture of the institutional identity crisis globally, what we've done here is absolutely amazing. Now the Triennale in Milan wants to create a similar forum, too. They see what's going on, and they want to copy it and take it over. It is seen and acknowledged. We only need to find a way of taking the next step. What will it be? What does it need? In order to really be radical and not fall back into the status quo of the institution. Maybe it also needs a break.

GC Like a dormant phase to really understand what's next?

BVDH Yes. Maybe Art Club 2 needs to start programming in November 2024. Until then, we need this dormant phase to discover if everyone is in the right position. I see it as an active phase, because we are still building. Do we have everything for the next step?

Cristina Ferretti

**Head of Marketing and Communication Department at Museion.
Former Administrative Director. Former internal member of the Public Program group**

GC You have recently assumed the role of Head of the Marketing and Communication Department. When did you arrive at Museion and how did you become involved in the Art Club project?

CF I began working at Museion in February 2021, as Administrative Director. The Director, Bart van der Heide, had started his tenure in June of the previous year. When I arrived, the concept of Art Club had already been proposed to the museum board and staff, but the project had yet to take shape due to a lack of human resources to develop it. The primary objective with this initiative was to establish a stronger connection with the urban culture of the region by amplifying the voices of its diverse subcultures. Moreover, it aimed to provide a platform for young audiences to express themselves creatively, increase visibility, and network.

Given my background as a business accelerator and project manager for nearly thirty years, I eagerly embraced the opportunity to support the development of this innovative idea. I initially discussed the concept with the Private Founders, in particular with Paolo Ferretti, Federico Giudiceandrea, and Paolo Vanoni. We all agreed and highlighted the challenges in finding networking contexts encountered by individuals departing South Tyrol for professional reasons, as well as those arriving in search of opportunities. Art Club's primary goal is to establish a dynamic platform that encourages dialogue and the exchange of ideas among participants, enriching in this way also the local cultural scene.

GC Was Art Club conceived with the specificity of the local context in mind?

CF Yes, the Art Club format was conceived having the specificity of South Tyrol in mind. But it's a model that could potentially be adapted and implemented elsewhere. However, it's important to note that this project demands a significant amount of energy and dedication from the staff. It's not merely a side activity; rather, it's a comprehensive project that involves the active participation of all departments on a daily basis.

In my view, there was a strong desire within the Museion team to establish a distinctive presence and make a meaningful impact. South Tyrol is often associated more with preservation than with innovation. There has been ongoing debate for almost two decades about the relevance of the *cube*[1] on the territory. Introducing alternative formats is seen as a way to assert our presence and demonstrate our commitment to operating beyond the traditional roles of conservation, collection

1 It's the ironic nickname given by the locals to Museion, referring to its architectural shape.

management, exhibitions, and education. While we continue to fulfill these core functions, we also prioritize sustainability and inclusion, aligned with the vision of a contemporary museum.

GC How does the task force of the Private Founders contribute to this project?

CF The Private Funders decided to financially support the Art Club activities. Out of all the projects presented to them as part of the new director's four-year plan, they have specifically chosen to back this initiative. The museum regularly updates them on the programs, inviting them to attend both the plenary meetings and the events, keeping them informed and engaged. Meanwhile, they are actively looking for new models and solutions, seeking potential collaborations, sponsorships, and innovative ideas. However, this process remains a work in progress.

GC What criteria did you use in selecting the nine external members for the first edition of Art Club?

CF At the Kick-Off presentation of the project, we invited individuals whose work aligned with our vision across diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Over forty young creatives from the local area participated in the meeting, sharing their expectations regarding the role and function of a contemporary museum, beyond the exhibition mandate. At the end of the meeting, everyone expressed interest in being part of this new initiative. It was a pleasant surprise!

We decided to divide the activities into three groups, which were named Content, New Audience, and Public Program. Our goal was twofold: to enhance museum sustainability while offering a platform for youthful creativity to cultivate lasting connections. The aspiration is for these individuals to maintain ties with Museion even after their tenure as Art Club members concludes.

We have a segment of the public who have been actively engaged with the museum for 15 years, forming its established audience base. They visit regularly, stay informed, and interact with museum publications. Moreover, we sought to engage a younger demographic of creative professionals looking to have a voice in South Tyrol.

GC Did the idea of working with three groups stem from a need within the museum?

CF The three groups correspond to the museum's user and visitor groups. We aimed to address the diverse requests from our audience. For the director, creating a moment of intergenerational networking was crucial. The activities offered cater to a wide range of interests: the clubbing events are for anyone seeking a pleasant evening out; the Factory appeals to those looking to update their practice by

connecting with like-minded people; and through Content, there's space for discussion and an exchange of ideas, opening up to a variety of different disciplinary languages.

GC Has there been a change in the audience since the launch of the Art Club project?

CF Art Club has received an immediate and unexpectedly positive reception, considering the complexity of the proposal. Strong formats like *Museion Factory*, *Opening the Pill*, and *Occupy* exceeded expectations, signaling a promising start for enhancing the project's visibility. It's gratifying to see an institution with limited resources produce such stimulating projects. The audience primarily consists of individuals aged between 20 and 35/40 years old. However, there is still a segment of the audience that needs to understand the project better and may not yet feel fully engaged.

GC Compared to the initial vision of Art Club, how has the project evolved and developed? Initially, it was presented as an expanded Forum, comprising a core of nine selected individuals and a network involving all other professionals invited to the first meeting, as well as those interested in joining and actively participating in the initiative. However, Art Club was not implemented as planned.

CF We always invite all participants from the initial Kick Off, both potential project participants and Private Founders. Not everyone ends up participating, but we don't attach any significance to this. Now, as we're working on Art Club 2, we're reconsidering everyone who participated in Art Club 1. The nine members were selected, but the others were not excluded.

GC In the second edition, will the structure of Art Club be kept exactly the same?

CF In recent months, Museion has undergone various changes, but Art Club has not been affected by these alterations; however, it has responded to these stimuli. Art Club 2 will undoubtedly be the evolution of Art Club 1, incorporating everything we have observed and noted to retain and improve upon. Collaborating with external professionals engaged in other professional realms is challenging. However, it is very important for us that the creative group is external and is periodically renewed, to give space and voice to evolving ideas.

GC Do you consider the current structure of Art Club to be effective?

CF From my perspective, the current form provides a certain degree of freedom in the development of contents and formats. Compartmentalizing all roles, functions, and deadlines, would impact the creative aspect of exchange and cross-disciplinarity.

However, the simultaneity of events within the museum poses a challenge in managing all activities. It would be ideal to have a dedicated Project Leader and to create a division within the museum exclusively focused on producing Art Club events. This should be separated from the other activities of the museum and the exhibition production. Over time, Art Club could also be reimagined outside of Museion, as an autonomous association, with its own life and management. This is primarily an economic decision.

GC How frequent did you initially envision these events would be?

CF Initially, we had considered hosting an event each month, but it's not feasible, especially when there are exhibitions occupying the entire museum space. This is particularly true now that even the Passage area has become an exhibition space with three exhibitions per year.

GC Do the audience members participating in Art Club events also become regular visitors to other museum activities?

CF I think it's too early to say. However, even though I don't have statistics, I've noticed new groups of attendees and increased interest and curiosity. I think that within 20 months, it's already something. I'm very excited about this project.

At the opening in May (2023) of the artist Shimabuku's *Me, We* exhibition, there was a new audience. We had already noticed it, but now they have been showing up repeatedly. If you look at the photos, you can recognize a large portion of the audience in the 20 to 40 age range. Those who came to the exhibition opening also attended the *Occupy* event organized by the Public Program group. There were a thousand people: If they start to get to know us, maybe then they will come back. Familiarity creates hospitality and well-being.

GC Do you think Art Club is recognizable to the external public as an independent format from the museum?

CF Not entirely. There's a lot of communication work to be done. The issue lies in the branding and positioning of the project itself, which we've been refining over the months. We've focused our energies and resources on developing the project, and now it's time to work on the communication strategy. A new event manager will join us at the beginning of June (*Note: 2023*), and then we'll be able to dedicate ourselves to these activities too.

GC Can you tell me about the decision to leave the Public Program group, of which you were initially an internal member of the museum?

CF I voluntarily left the Public Program, both due to my age and professional background. When I joined the group, I perceived a desire for dialogue, but my role often led others to seek my approval. In this initial phase of decision-making, I didn't want to influence others' choices.

GC How does Art Club impact the museum's dynamics? How do the two mutually influence each other? And how do museum staff contribute to Art Club's processes?

CF Art Club has a significant impact on the museum's dynamics. It is deeply integrated into the museum's daily operations and influences decisions regarding timing, execution, and space use. All departments are involved in these processes.

The work behind these formats is not only a learning experience in project management and overcoming challenges but also enriches both the team and event participants. Despite difficulties and stress, the experience translates into lasting benefits. Each project, such as Art Club 1 and those in 2021/22, has been a learning opportunity: we have adjusted them on the fly to fit resources, time constraints, and needs, as the museum's structure was not originally designed for this.

Project Leaders share their thoughts, ideas, and contacts, fueling the circulation of ideas within the groups. Director van der Heide is also actively engaged; I find his input precious. Even though he is not involved in day-to-day activities, he provides an external perspective that can assess the beauty of projects, which can sometimes be lost when working from an internal viewpoint. He offers insights, connections, and maintains continuous exchange, preventing isolation among the working groups.

GC Evaluating these two years, what has worked and what hasn't?

CF I think the project has been successful in terms of its rapid progress. The internal team has shown enthusiasm and eagerness to tackle challenges and meet the diverse expectations of the Art Club members.

Fatima el Hajjaji
Event Manager at Museion, Project Leader of the Public Program group. She resigned from Museion in March 2023

GC What is your background and when did you start working at Museion?

FEH I worked for a few years as a project manager for Transart[1] and other major events in Bolzano. I arrived at Museion in 2019 when the previous Director, Letizia Ragaglia, was still there. I was involved in event management: organizing small events such as talks or openings, activities to engage with contemporary art, official introductions, and buffets. I also handled the organization of guided tours with the director or curators, especially during big events like ICOM Day.

When the new director, Bart van der Heide, arrived, he wanted to make a change at the museum and in its activities. The first event he curated was *Here to Stay*, which was immediately very intense. It was an open call to give space to anyone, with requests coming in unfiltered to present a proposal in the museum's empty spaces during the lockdown. Upon his arrival, he also introduced the idea of Art Club, initially conceived as a weekly event to engage young people. It was evident that the workload would increase, particularly concerning events.

When Art Club was presented, I wasn't supposed to be its Project Manager, nor was I supposed to be the Project Leader of the Public Program group. Initially, Sarah Greenwood (*Note: at the time Marketing Manager*) was identified for that role, but then the responsibility was assigned to me.

GC What potential did you perceive in the project when it was presented to you?

FEH I was excited about this initiative. During my initial months at Museion, coming from the fast-paced environment of festivals, I found a much slower rhythm. When Art Club project was launched, I felt motivated: there was an opportunity to contribute to its organization from the ground up, which was both new and thrilling to me. I was eager to explore what it meant to establish such a complex and multilayered project, seeing it as a chance to develop new skills.

GC When did you start working on Art Club?

FEH The project had been in the works for some time, but it wasn't until Cristina's arrival in February 2021 that everything kicked off very quickly.

1 Transart is a multidisciplinary festival spanning from music to dance, from visual arts to performance. It's organized every year during the first two weeks of September.

GC What was the original idea behind the project? Has it remained the same or has it changed over time?

FEH The basic idea has always been to engage young people (aged 20-35) and enable them to play an active role in the development of projects presented at Museion. The Director wanted to create a situation where the creative community could meet and provide input to develop projects together, which indeed happened.

Upon his arrival, he tasked me with conducting a study on the existing entities in the province, their offerings, and the target audience for each. He aimed to obtain a general understanding of the local scene.

GC What was the audience participation like after the project was launched?

FEH Art Club managed to attract an audience interested in culture, art, performance, and electronic music. I noticed that in the past, there weren't as many young people at openings; there was always a small group of university students, but they were much fewer. Especially young people not connected with the university were lacking, part of other collectives and communities. Now, they've also realized that there are contents within Museion that could interest them, that concern them, and this isn't just during openings, but throughout the year. By attending side events or casually passing through during a guided tour, I realized how many young people were in the galleries. And it's wonderful, it really worked. Even on workdays, young people would come to visit the exhibitions.

GC As a member of the Public Program group, what are the formats that you have developed?

FEH Our assignment was to organize one event for each exhibition opening and two additional events. Initially, we brainstormed many formats that we didn't implement. We were interested in repurposing exhibition spaces for different activities, such as yoga with experimental music. We had thought about small activities like bike tours following routes related to electronic music. We also had in mind a street parade, a project we didn't manage to realize, involving not only Bolzano but also neighboring cities. Then, with *Occupy* and the events during the openings, our project took a very specific direction, particularly after the August 2022 event that lasted 12 hours, from 10 in the morning until 10 at night. Initially, the idea was to organize a 24-hour event, but it was impossible for safety reasons. We settled for 12 hours, which was still significant. We occupied the space in front of the museum, on the Talvera meadows, alternating moments of music with moments of collective discussion. That event received very positive feedback, and the Director asked us to continue with this format because it worked well.

GC In terms of group dynamics, how did you work together? Were you able to stick to the two hours per month set by the contract?

FEH I was very precise and made sure not to abuse anyone's personal time. Some people were very strict about payments, I understood that, so I tried to be very careful, and in the end, we never worked more than what was agreed upon. However, there was always a sense of discontent, a feeling of working too much for too little money, but in reality, it wasn't the case because we never exceeded the agreed-upon hours.

I couldn't plan the hours for external production, so I asked the external members of the group to make a calculation for additional fees. Philipp Kieser certainly worked more than the others, but he also received very fair fees for the work he did. He contacted all the DJs for the openings, negotiated contracts, and checked availability. Once the contacts were established, I coordinated everything else, such as communication, contacts with the design agency, or involving a producer.

GC In your opinion, what worked well? And how did Art Club diverge from the original idea?

FEH The approach of engaging young people and bringing a fresh perspective to the museum worked extremely well. It attracted diverse expertise and breathed new life into the institution. However, Art Club deviated significantly from the initial concept. Initially, there wasn't a clear and managerial understanding of what it takes to realize such a project. It's one thing to have an idea written on paper, but it's another to understand that if you want to actually achieve something, the level of involvement required must be greater. I mean involvement both in terms of operational and conceptual aspects of project realization, leadership, and project coordination.

I often hinted that a more direct, immediate, and informal contact was needed to improve communication or facilitate it in terms of collective meetings with groups and feedback. Especially in one of the last internal meetings with the museum staff, I insisted multiple times, but there wasn't a willingness to do so.

GC Do you think the structure of Art Club works as it is, or does it need to be changed?

FEH It should have a less complex and smaller structure. An alternative would be to increase the staff.

GC How did Art Club differ from what you expected?

FEH I remained enthusiastic until the end, but as the pace became increasingly intense, I realized I was already overwhelmed with tasks. Even after expressing my limits and declining additional responsibilities, the workload continued to grow. Unfortunately, improvements were not made, and feedback regarding the quality of collaborations was not taken into account.

GC Do you think the communication for such a manifold project like Art Club worked well?

FEH In my opinion, it's difficult for the people outside to understand what Art Club is because it's such a huge and complex initiative. From the beginning, there hasn't been a focused communication strategy. Initially, it was managed somewhat haphazardly. We were in a period where there wasn't a Department Head or a Press Office to handle communications. I don't think enough importance was given to this aspect. It would have helped to communicate the project effectively, even just once. There was some coverage in the local press, but it wasn't effective in reaching young people. It's such a large project that it would need its own communication department, producer, and curator..

GC Do you think it's a possibility the team is considering? Is Art Club a project that will continue to grow within the museum?

FEH In the last meetings I attended, aimed at setting up Art Club 2, there was difficulty in identifying any potential internal Project Leaders for the next edition. These roles are crucial, even if it is just for interfacing with all the bureaucracy that you don't see but must be respected. We were supposed to have another meeting to set up a workshop, but it has been postponed several times.

GC How are Project Leaders chosen? Are they selected based on their roles within the museum?

FEH For the first edition, the focus was on identifying younger individuals who had opportunities for development.

GC Do you think Art Club played a role in the decision of those who left Museion?

FEH Not specifically. For instance, I didn't leave because of Art Club, but rather due to overall workload. I had asked for help because for over three months, I was doing 50 hours of overtime, even working weekends, and I was very tired. I had mentioned that I needed an assistant. They postponed my request until October when they said someone would arrive in 2024. November and December were extremely intense, and

during the Christmas holidays, I realized I wasn't well. After making peace with this decision, I started looking for another job. It wasn't easy; I liked what I was doing and the people I was working with. There was a civic aspect to what I was doing.

GC If you were to suggest a change for Art Club, what would it be?

FEH It would definitely be related to workforce and budget. Also, clarifying roles and responsibilities, what is expected from both internal and external members.

Frida Carazzato
Scientific Curator at Museion and Project Leader Content group

GC What is your background and when did you start working at Museion?

FC I have a degree in philosophy. After graduating, I did two master's degrees, one in museum management and museum services and then a master's in curatorship. The internship at the end of this last master's in 2009 I did at Museion, then I stayed at this institution. First as a curatorial assistant, now as a research curator.

GC How did you get involved in the Art Club project and why did you decide to participate?

FC When the new Director arrived in June 2020, he presented his programme to the entire museum staff. Art Club is one of the three pillars of his vision for the four-year term. The other two are the exhibition programme *Techno Humanities* and the *Academy* format.

The Director has an idea of the museum as an agency, meaning an active agent in its territory supporting creative practices. Art Club is probably the project dearest to him. He conceived and created it from scratch. He always mentions it when speaking in interviews or at public meetings. Through Art Club, he wants to create aggregation with respect to the creative scene in South Tyrol. At the beginning of his term, he asked me to take part in the project, seeing me as a suitable Project Leader for the group that would work with the Curatorial Department.

I think the Director had tried to figure out, based mainly on the professional skills of everyone in the museum, who could support the different activities. He tried to involve and give space to the younger people in the various departments, which was also the case with the other two project leaders, Roberta Pedrini for New Audiences and Fatima El Hajjaji for Public Program.

However, I think it is important to make a note regarding the specific context of this experience. Museion is a public-private foundation financed by the Province of Bolzano — which is also the owner of the building that houses the museum — and by private investors, the Private Founders. There is security in the funds allocated, which allows the development and planning of the museum's activities over time. In the case of Art Club, for example, 100,000 euros were initially allocated. The instability of Italian museum governance is something that does not allow other public institutions, financed by state funds with a more complex and uncertain bureaucratic process, this kind of planning. For example, during the periodic meetings with members of Amaci, the Italian Contemporary Art Museums Association, I have had the opportunity to meet many brilliant people who work in museums, but whose precarious

situation prevents experimental or medium- to long-term programming. This situation mirrors that of many Italian museum directors, who are not employed but instead work as independent contractors with VAT numbers. This frames their role as consultants rather than as a workforce embedded in the internal processes of a museum.

While recognising, therefore, the value of the Art Club project, I think it is important to point out that it has been able to develop partly as a result of the specific context in which it operates.

GC How was the initiative internally structured?

FC When we launched Art Club, we did not have a specific theme or a clear objective that we wanted to develop. This was the case, for instance, with the Progress Bar, one of the projects that had served as a reference for the Director. In our case, we were not looking for specific people who could help us develop an already defined idea. Rather, we started from the practices and activities that specific people were carrying out in the area.

Initially, we included older people, then we were asked to target an age group between 20 and 35. One point the Director consistently emphasizes, although I have some reservations, is that the Art Club project facilitates the involvement of the Museion's audience in the museum's initiatives. This is partly true, but it's important to specify which segment of the public is being referenced. Many of the people we chose to involve were not previously regular visitors to the museum but became so afterwards.

The planning, therefore, wasn't predetermined but rather evolved during the meetings after the groups had been established. The difficulty for the Content group, I think, was also due to the lack of a clear brief, in contrast with the other two groups. Whereas Public Program knew that it had to take care of exhibition openings and New Audience knew it had to develop a new audience through different formats; in our case it was about developing content, but what does that mean? When I initially asked the Director whether our planning would need to align with the exhibitions, he said not necessarily. More than any other group in our case, we had to give ourselves goals. Even very ambitious ones.

GC Was there originally a specific area within the museum designated for this project?

FC In the beginning, the Director had the idea to provide a permanent space for Art Club on the museum's underground floor. The space had to be renovated to be really suitable for this purpose, and the Private Founders were willing to finance the operation. The project then turned out to be too complex for various reasons. The building belongs to the Province, which would then have to approve the changes. In addition, the Private Founders had their own agenda regarding the space, such as a private club with a catering service. I do not know how this is developing.

GC What has been the response to the activities proposed by the Content Group so far?

FC In terms of audience, I can say the response and participation to the events was excellent. In terms of programming, I think we achieved a good balance of content, beginning with local themes and expanding into discussions with broader international relevance. These topics would not have been developed in this way without the contribution of external professionals. What I sometimes miss, however, is a proposal for a more diverse and perhaps less knowledgeable audience, but one that is, nevertheless, curious and open to questioning.

GC What difficulties and what strengths have you found in this initiative?

FC Certainly I can positively assess the type of content we developed. On the other hand, the assessment regarding the scheduling and production of activities is barely adequate. When the project was started the workload was certainly underestimated. The original idea was that Museion's production department would realise the programmes of the three groups. But this was not sustainable as the Event Manager herself was involved in one of the Art Club groups and also had to produce the entire calendar of the museum's events. This meant a rapid cascading of more tasks and work onto both internal and external members, who were not only involved in devising projects but also in curating and producing them. There were many hours of overtime for the realisation of projects or meetings with the team, and this was not possible to quantify at the beginning.

As it is currently imagined and developed, the structure of Art Club is too complex, and I think it should be lightened. In the Director's mind, Art Club is a constantly growing project. With more funds, one could think of having a producer hired specifically and entrusted with the exclusive task of following all Art Club programming. It is not clear how autonomous the project should be from the museum itself in the future. It's crucial from a bureaucratic standpoint to understand whether, for instance, assignments, calls, and other processes still necessitate adherence to the museum's administrative framework, or if streamlined procedures can be adopted instead.

Even in terms of communication, the project currently is too complex; the public has not yet clearly understood the existence of Art Club. The structure is too complex and the proposal is incredibly heterogeneous.

Moreover, the proposal, being hosted within the museum, is perceived as part of its own programming. A largely general audience finds it difficult to perceive the existence of this working group, which is potentially also as a result of the heterogeneity of the proposal.

GC How has the project impacted on the dynamics of the museum? Did it change its organisation and structure?

FC I believe that more than anything else, the project has had an impact on the load and working hours of the people directly involved, both the internal members of the groups and the technical and administrative staff. For the latter, if we want to give concrete examples, the design of Art Club means more contracts, more invoices, more suppliers. Or for the Communication Department, different projects to communicate do not simply translate into numbers but also into a diversified work for the recognition and dissemination of the proposal.

GC Would you change anything about Art Club?

FC The Director always spoke of the Art Club project as a 'learning by doing' process. This certainly, depending on the individual, had different results and impacts, but in retrospect perhaps it would have made sense to begin it in a format that was more adaptable and scalable. In recent weeks, when staff were asked for their availability for the second edition of the project, many raised concerns about replicating the same format. This option isn't feasible for me due to the number of hours outlined in my job description. Since I'm still committed to Art Club 1, I wouldn't be able to manage overlapping schedules between the two groups.

GC From your perspective, do you believe Art Club achieved its intended objectives?

FC There has certainly been a change in audiences. However, it is difficult to have objective feedback, as the museum hasn't implemented tools to monitor these processes. However, such information would be very important to track. For instance, I've heard from local acquaintances that under the new management, the museum appears to be more accessible and approachable, less like an ivory tower.

Certainly, when you invest with a certain type of proposal, you reach and include a specific audience, but you inevitably lose others. This is what happened, for example, with the groups of young people with whom we had previously worked for years in the more peripheral areas of the city. These are slow processes, requiring time and constant investment of energy and attention. The impact on the museum works particularly well, in my opinion, when Art Club events are incorporated into the exhibition spaces. As was the case, for example, with the symposium *Opening the Pill*. In this case, there is a fusion between the activities of the public programme and those of the museum. The public also mingle and get to know each other.

For instance, the techno scene proved to be a successful response to the public, particularly in the post-pandemic period when the museum was one of the few open venues capable of offering such content. Now that all activities have resumed, it's crucial for the scene to reclaim the spaces it occupied previously.

This in my opinion is an important point: Museion must be one of the cultural meeting spaces in the province but not *the* space. It is important that it does not replace other realities that already exist and function very well. The Director sometimes presents Art Club as a project aimed at fostering local creativity and retaining the younger generation in the area, but I don't agree with this kind of rhetoric. Instead, I think it is more interesting for people to move, to create dialogue, and change, and for them to recognise Museion as a hub and a place to connect. Most of the people currently working at Art Club have come to Bolzano from elsewhere or have left the city for other places, but they stay connected online and return whenever possible.

Roberta Pedrini
Coordinator Educational Projects and Project Leader New Audiences group

GC What is your background? When did you start working at Museion and what do you do there?

RP I work within the Public Services Department. For about five years, I have been in charge of the coordination of educational projects. I am the Head of the educational activities.

I joined Museion in 2012 as an art mediator, initially focusing on conducting guided tours and facilitating *Art Dialogues*, a format introduced during Museion's early years. At that time, there was a significant challenge in mediating complex content for the public. The Art Dialogues emerged as an innovative initiative under the guidance of the then-director, Michael Giacomozzi. These dialogues involved engaging conversations with the public led by art experts, aimed at dispelling doubts and, most importantly, fostering shared interpretations of contemporary art's meaning.

Now my responsibilities include coordinating all courses, both in terms of content and organization, catering to diverse audiences. The core focus lies in school programs, encompassing various educational activities. Additionally, a significant portion of my role involves catering to 'fragile audiences.' Furthermore, I oversee activities for the general public, including guided tours, art dialogues, and a wide array of programs tailored to different age groups and specific needs.

GC With respect to the new Director's mandate, your department has a central involvement in the *Academy* project. All long-life learning projects are what you deal with in your department, right?

RP Exactly. Under the name Academy are all those activities that provide people with a lasting educational experience. These proposals involve people at any age. We start with children from the age of four, for the more structured tours, but we also have kits for families to borrow at the museum entrance to have an independent experience in the exhibition, with some playful input in order to begin to unfold some of the content. These kits are developed specifically for each exhibition. The aim is that children of all ages, from toddlers to pre-adolescents, can feel involved in some way with what is on offer.

GC As a department, you're highly active and have established numerous relationships with associations and entities in the area. Could you please elaborate on these connections?

RP A significant part of our collaborations are with schools. Additionally, there's a range of other formats that are increasingly integrating with the new management's approach. This shift aims to ensure full accessibility without imposing limitations on target audiences.

However, we acknowledge that achieving universal accessibility is idealistic and not entirely equitable due to individual differences. Therefore, we have developed specific formats tailored to particular needs. For instance, my colleague Brita Köhler oversees the 'Alzheimer Circle' project, while I manage the 'In all senses' programs designed for audiences facing cognitive limitations that prevent them from participating in traditional guided tours. Furthermore, we offer programs dedicated to audiences with migrant backgrounds, focusing on literacy and facilitating their integration into the local community through active citizenship courses.

GC How are these partnerships activated? Are there any associations you are in dialogue with?

RP Yes, like Donne Nissà, for example. Additionally, there's the therapeutic community Hands, which is undoubtedly a significant partner, along with the hospital itself. Under the 'In all senses' umbrella, we encompass all activities conducted in the spirit of care, not only for patients but also for caregivers. For instance, twice a year, nurses from the hospital engage in a unique approach to the issues they deal with daily. We provide them with exhibition tours focusing on art, allowing them to explore topics closely related to their own personal experiences.

GC How did you become involved in Art Club project and at what stage of its conceptualization?

RP I joined Art Club at a later stage. Initially three other Project Leaders had been chosen: Brita Köhler, Sara Greenwood, and Frida Carazzato. The team later decided that these roles should be held by people who did not hold such high-ranking positions in Museion's hierarchical structure, so Fatima and I were appointed. It was June 2021.

GC Was the idea for each participant to come from a different department within the museum?

RP Exactly. I was associated with New Audiences, since I interact with audiences regularly.

GC Did Museion's intention to involve participants aged between 20 and 35 in the initiative align with the audience they intended to engage?

RP Yes. Art Club had to encompass that age range, aligning with the target audience we were supposed to engage.

GC Was the initial brief for the New Audiences group clear from the beginning? How did you approach the task?

RP There was a moment of confusion at the beginning, but the brief provided to the group, in my opinion, was clear. We were tasked to develop a sustainable format to address issues related to the body and language, and to explore various formats. For those unfamiliar with the subject, this could be considered a very abstract task. From my perspective, the theme closely aligned with what we were already exploring in our department through our collection, particularly visual poetry and written word poetry, making it a familiar topic. However, the broad framework within which to work may have been too expansive, leading creativity to verge on chaos at times.

GC What formats have you developed? How did you address the theme of the body and language?

RP The format developed is called *Museion Factory*. We organise participatory residencies in workshop format. The guest artist works closely with a maximum of 15 young participants. The activity also includes moments open to the general public, outside the target audience, such as a dinner-evening with the artist. In this situation, the guest in residence can present his or her practice to a wider audience. At the end of the workshop, there is a final session to share the process and results with the public. University students collaborate, combining their methods with those of the guest artist. This final output revises what was developed during the residency. Students are encouraged to join the activities, but they can choose their level of involvement. This approach offers different levels of enjoyment: participants, observers, and collaborators who become artists within Museion.

GC It is a very articulate format.

RP You got straight to the difficult point. We have trouble explaining all the different levels and details to others. We worry if people understand what we share or if it is too multilayered. Also the production, organisation, and curatorship of these events are very complex.

GC Is the entire team involved in organizing these events, or are specific people responsible for each residence?

RP For each residency, an external member takes the lead. Each participant interprets the theme of the relationship between language and the body through their own practice. For instance, Alex Giovanelli focuses on spoken poetry and has invited Otis Mensah,

while Andrea Bernard collaborates with Teatro de los Sentidos. In July, Ada Keller will explore the theme of togetherness alongside designer Sebastian Marbacher, who will lead a workshop focused on creating seating structures with social involvement.

GC Regarding the response to the proposed activities, did you achieve your objectives? What types of audiences did you engage?

RP The objective was successfully met in terms of age demographics. Additionally, participants from communities of practice were already acquainted with the terminology and protocols. However, since these practices are highly inclusive, individuals with similar interests could also participate.

GC Do you think workshop participants also become visitors to the exhibitions?

RP Good question. I think this new audience appreciates the proposal and is likely to return. However, an important aspect to consider is that it's a very young audience, often in Bolzano for only a short period due to study or work commitments.

GC What are the challenges in communicating your projects?

RP On one hand, our events always feature complex storytelling due to the richness of the proposal. On the other hand, this complexity clashes with the rigidity of the layout defined by the designers for Art Club.

GC Did you rely only on Museion's official communication channels or did you also contact specific audiences in a more personal way?

RP We extensively communicate the Museion Factory events on a personal level. This helps to convey the complexity that could not be effectively communicated otherwise.

GC In terms of group dynamics, how did you work together? Were you able to stick to the two hours per month set by the contract?

RP Every member of the group feels responsible for the project, fostering motivation among all. However, due to the diverse nature of individual interests and disciplines, there were instances where one person seemed to lead more. Moreover, the allocated two hours

per month, especially during the initial conceptualization phase, proved inadequate

GC Once the format was established, was it easy to replicate it over time while simply modifying its contents?

RP Yes and no. After the initial meetings and receiving feedback, we continued to adapt the format based on the new information we obtained.

GC What potential did you initially see in the project, and how have your expectations changed over time?

RP The potential I initially perceived was the opportunity to address, explore, and broaden alternative practices with people beyond the institution. However, I now realize that Museion's institutional framework is so firmly established that our efforts may have merely reiterated what one would typically expect from a museum. The potential for revolution seems constrained by the existing institutional structures. While there is wide space for creative content, ideas, and input, they must nonetheless conform to the pre-existing frameworks. Consequently, the outcomes reflect what could have been achieved within the existing parameters.

GC What leads you to say this?

RP Strong pre-existing structures. I believe there's no intentional direction, but rather, these structures influence the mechanisms and processes. The methods and routines within these processes are then automatically reproduced.

GC Would you change anything about Art Club?

RP I would make it more independent. I would make it an external project, not completely absorbed by the system of institutions. It could almost become a kind of satellite.

GC However, it seems that, on the contrary, Art Club has penetrated the museum dynamics significantly, hasn't it? One perceives a different porosity between the institution's inside and outside dynamics.

RP If this porosity were not there, it would be a pity because Art Club would become a totally external entity.

GC Would you change anything in the current structure of Art Club?

RP It should be simplified. Practically speaking, having three groups might be too much for Museion's structure and staffing. Alternatively, we might need to adjust our initial goals; while Art Club has brought significant changes, it must navigate the challenges of our large organization. Art Club has certainly added complexity and diversity. Its influence has spread throughout the organization, creating a more intricate landscape. This complexity isn't necessarily negative; it has enriched our organization with more layers and elements. Communication between departments has improved, leading to more collaboration across different areas like communication, event organization, marketing, curation, and education.

GC Is this exchange something different from the past?

RP Yes, this is something new. While the concept is promising, the practical implementation of the transformation has proven challenging. However, it holds potential benefits for our future colleagues. We find ourselves adapting old methods to new practices, necessitating a reevaluation of our approach with the knowledge we've carried forward. The year 2022 was particularly intense in this regard. Despite Art Club's original aim to cultivate a sense of community, it's unfortunate that this hasn't fully materialized; opportunities for team building have been limited. Interaction among the three groups has been lacking, with each team operating independently.

GC The museum didn't want to pursue collaboration among the groups.

RP Yes, but it is critical.

GC Did you get any positive feedback?

RP I've received positive feedback, and I've also observed a change attending the events. If attendance numbers serve as an indicator of success, there's certainly curiosity. These events have instigated conversations about Museion that I haven't encountered before.

Eleonora Castagna
External member of Public Program group

GC Eleonora, could you start by introducing yourself and your practice?

EC I studied contemporary art curating at Naba in Milan and gained diverse work experiences, primarily abroad. I've worked in the United States, France, and Germany, across various institutional contexts. I've served as an assistant curator for art residencies, contributed to curatorial teams in museum institutions, and then moved into the realm of commercial galleries. For two and a half years, I worked as an assistant at the ChertLüdde gallery in Berlin, and I've recently assumed the role of director at the Doris Ghetta gallery in Ortisei, Italy.

GC Why did you decide to join Art Club? What potential and relevance do you see in it compared to the contemporary and local scene?

EC I was contacted by Frida who told me that Museion was about to launch the Art Club project, and she thought I might be an interested and interesting person for what was being created. I was interested in taking part because it was a period in my life when I was starting to collaborate with the Biennial in Val Gardena, but I still had some free time. I wanted to know more about the context of Museion and its programme under the new direction of Bart van der Heide. I was also interested in the network of professionals working on the local scene that I thought would be created through Art Club.

However, I can say that there was not much collaboration, neither between the selected professionals nor between the three working groups. During the first year, everyone worked on their projects, and we never compared what we were working on with each other. Even the division into groups was not clear to me: I ended up as curator organising events at the openings. It was interesting, but I was not able to bring my curatorial expertise to the project.

GC Was your preference for the Content group?

EC Yes. Since Frida had contacted me, I thought she wanted me to collaborate with her team.I believe they assigned me to the Public Program to foster synergy. While it had potential, that aspect was lacking. I'm speaking from a practical perspective, because on a human level, I get on very well with the people in the group.

GC What would you have done differently?

EC My idea of the Public Program group was much more invasive than the one that was realised. When I proposed the Occupy project I imagined the audience to be able to experience the museum as an urban space in which things could happen outside the institutionally planned programming. The idea was to use Museion's structure in moments of transition between exhibitions. This was not possible because there were security conditions to be met.

GC How did you work in the group? You have different backgrounds, how did you work to integrate the heterogeneity of your practices?

EC We had big, beautiful ideas. When we were developing the concept, I suggested drawing inspiration from a fungal network - a separate entity underground that would give rise to more visible elements, like trees and woods. It would serve as a foundation upon which a more visible structure could rest. However, this idea couldn't be fully realized. The turning point came during the August 2022 event, a 12-hour Occupy. It sparked a debate about subcultures and music culture, and their interaction with the city of Bolzano. The issue of noise complaints outside designated hours arose, prompting questions about engaging with the local population, identifying what wasn't working between Museion, and defining the museum's target audience. The Director conceived Art Club not only for young professionals, but also as an effort to better connect with the local community historically hostile of Museion.

GC Your Occupy events always have excellent participation, with a thousand people per evening. Do you think the audience participating also visits the museum for the exhibitions afterward?

EC The initial idea of *Occupy* was precisely to build audience loyalty. To make sure that visitors are not just visitors but enter the museum to explore it, not just seeing it as a museum that offers you the contemporary art exhibition but using the spaces in an alternative way, making the population re-appropriate the museum itself.

I think the idea of Art Club is very good, but the structure needs work. If there are three working groups and a multitude of activities to coordinate, the museum should assign one or two staff members dedicated to this initiative. We need also an Event Manager who can focus exclusively on Art Club without other Museion responsibilities. Furthermore, if the museum asks professionals to actively contribute to the production of its events -rather than just providing occasional consultations-, it is imperative to allocate adequate budget and agree on this workload from the beginning.

GC What is your evaluation after one year of work?

EC It often felt like we were constantly chasing deadlines. As the Public Program group, we immediately began organizing events, even though we weren't entirely sure of our objectives. Unlike structures such as the Pogo Bar in Berlin at the HKW — which the Director referenced — Museion lacks a dedicated curatorial team for our program. Instead, Philip Kieser carries most of the management responsibilities, given the limited availability of both Thomas and myself.

GC You are also an Art Workers[1] member: Does this background of yours influence your involvment?

EC The decision to join Art Club also stemmed from the desire to bring the work ethic of Art Workers Italia (AWI) into the project. The association was established in 2020 during the pandemic when many professionals in the cultural field, primarily freelancers, realized that their work was not institutionally recognized and was becoming invisible to the state and other institutions during the emergency, resulting in severe economic consequences. This realization led to an important effort to reframe the creative sector's perception in Italy, an effort that continues today. Maintaining this awareness and fostering good practices in everything we do is crucial.

When Art Club started to involve me significantly, I made it clear that I couldn't devote more working time than what was agreed upon in the contract. We were hired for advisory services and offered a fee, and I wanted to adhere to those conditions out of personal ethics. Being part of AWI encourages self-regulation. While the art world often operates on a reputational economy, expecting people to work for free is deeply problematic and unjust

GC Can you expand on this point?

EC I personally restrained myself when I was asked to do more. Philip, for example, agreed on additional fees. Fatima, our project leader, however, did 50 hours of overtime per month. Art Club generated a surplus of work for the whole structure, but even within Museion it is not clear what everyone's work tasks are.

GC Yes, the museum staff's working conditions have been excessively demanding.

EC It often appears to me that in such cultural environments, where finding another job in the same field is exceedingly challenging, management tends to exploit this situation.

1 AWI (Art Workers Italia) is an association established in Italy in 2020 by a collective of contemporary art professionals. Its mission is to offer ethical, contractual, and legal resources aimed at safeguarding members within the creative sector. More info at https://www.artworkersitalia.it

GC Do you think the project's communication has been effective and that the audience grasps the essence of the initiative?

EC As a member of Art Club, I find it challenging myself to define what this initiative is. And I also wonder if Museion could broaden its range of events without necessarily establishing another structure. How autonomous is Art Club from Museion?

GC Do you believe that Art Club has been absorbed by the museum to the extent that its mechanisms and dynamics are indistinguishable from one another?

EC No, but I have the feeling that Art Club has simply become a series of side events of Museion.

GC Do you think it should be more autonomous?

EC The way I imagined it, yes. Art Club should function with greater independence, acting as an external organism that questions Museion's structure and encourages discussions the museum is willing to engage in. It should prompt people to critically examine Museion's role in the community, its operational methods, and initiate debates. However, Art Club's activities are totally aligned with Museion's existing framework, rather than challenging it.

GC Thanks to Art Club, the museum has gained a different visibility, and perception from the public. The message is that the community and museum audience curate the programme.

EC Yes, but is this a short-term or long-term achievement? In my view, it would have been far more compelling for Museion to spearhead a more revolutionary initiative. Creating an entity that challenges the museum's own structure through roundtable discussions, workshops, and events would have been intriguing. The museum should be asking itself and others: Am I functioning effectively? For whom? How can I improve? How can I engage with the audience beyond just exhibitions? Unfortunately, in my opinion, this hasn't happened.

GC Do you think that the potential of the initiative was channeled within an existing structure?

EC Yes. On the other hand, which museum structure can truly support such a process? It would be a nearly unique model. Magasin, the museum in Grenoble where I worked, faced the same issue.

It's a problem many contemporary art museums encounter: while the contemporary art community attends openings, the local community, who should be the primary audience, often does not. During my time there, my colleagues and I organized the exhibition *Briser la Glace*, meaning 'breaking the ice,' in an attempt to overcome this barrier. We allocated part of the exhibition budget to provide free tickets for a potential audience of 20,000 visitors. Although we curated a smaller exhibition, our aim was to open the museum doors and democratize art access. Charging 5 euros for a ticket creates a barrier; however, offering free admission with open doors changes the dynamic.

GC And how did it go?

EC Good, but even more could have been accomplished. Due to economic constraints, we couldn't implement more impactful choices. Nevertheless, there was a positive response from both the local community and the staff of Le Magasin. The initiative transformed the museum into a place where people lingered longer, not just to see the exhibition, but because the museum space was accessible. It's an experiment I would have liked to pursue further. The original proposal for the Occupy Museion format was aligned with this idea: opening up the museum building to those who should experience it on a daily basis.

GC That sounds similar to what they are trying to do in a small scale with the Passage...

EC Yes. I would really be interested in finding a museum that is willing to experiment even more radically in this regard. Perhaps what I envision is somewhat utopian, and I'm uncertain about its feasibility. I understand that exhibitions require artworks, which need to be preserved, thereby limiting the depth of interaction with the audience. However, I truly wish to experiment with and challenge institutional structures. I had hoped that this could be achieved with Museion, especially considering the Director's vision of creating something new.

Ada Keller
External member New Audience group

GC Ada, could you start by introducing yourself and your practice?

AK I work as a designer, in a very broad sense, ranging from conceptualizing and realizing spaces, objects, and projects. Often I work for clients on commission, other times I design independently together with a group of designers with whom I collaborate. At Museion, I am part of the New Audience group.

GC Why did you decide to join Art Club? What potential and relevance do you see in it compared to the contemporary and local scene?

AK When I was approached to participate, even though the proposal and project were not yet clearly defined, I thought it would be interesting to explore together with Museion a possible alternative form of interaction with "its audience." I believe that Art Club is a project of great value, innovative — at least from what I know — and inspiring in terms of possible forms of collaboration.

It is precisely in considering the collaborative aspect of the format that I see the potential connected to the local contemporary scene. The project lends itself to being a link between an institution and its audience, between those who are interested in art and those who produce it, between those who have space and those who do not, between what seems too elitist and what instead is close for others.

GC Did you attend Museion before joining Art Club?

AK I used to come to the museum during openings, and I had the opportunity to collaborate for designing the exhibit of some exhibitions. Taking part in the events was always stimulating: a social moment of exchange and meeting but also the chance to see something new, something far away.

GC Has your relationship with the museum changed since you started curating its public program?

AK My relationship with the museum hasn't changed significantly from before, but I do feel a bit more *at home*. I'm more familiar with navigating the spaces and interacting with the staff.

GC What was your working group tasked with? What were the challenges and strengths encountered?

AK We were asked to develop a format from scratch with the aim of building a 'new' audience with our target age, between 20 and 35. We started by imagining and fantasising a thousand possibilities, perhaps even getting lost in ideas, feasibility, and timing. Since the group was heterogeneous in terms of professional skills, it was quite easy to maintain a structured design. Each of us had the opportunity to contribute by bringing our own interests into the programme, and each of us was able to experience different roles within the project. However, we encountered several challenges: uncertainty regarding the expectations for our proposal, a lack of assurance and clarity about the available budget, and insufficient time to collectively define the project. At every meeting, we found ourselves questioning the decisions made previously.

GC What projects have you curated?

AK After the first six months of work, we developed a format called *Museion Factory*. It is a participatory residency program where we invite artists and professionals with diverse backgrounds to conduct a 5-day workshop. It's a space that opens its doors not only to 'outside' artists but also to the local scene, inviting local artists to organize workshops as well. Around ten participants, selected through an open call, take part in the activities and commit to sharing the results with a wider audience through a small end-of-residency exhibition. This moment is always connected to a dinner with the artist, open to all. This way, artistic practice unfolds on three different levels of intimacy — the workshop itself, the exhibition, and the dinner — providing the audience with the opportunity to choose how and to what extent they participate. In our intentions, this should broaden the possibilities for audience participation and interaction with the museum.

GC What is/has been the response to the activities developed and proposed?

AK Museion Factory emerged as a response to the challenges and achievements experienced during the various residencies we organized. Initially, workshops were designed to span five days, but we encountered difficulty in attracting participants. Subsequently, we discovered that one-day workshops sold out quickly. Although the nature of the work and practices varied, we had to consider the availability of our audience. Primarily, students from the Faculty of Design and Art participated. However, events like 'Art & Food' dinners, open to the public with the artist, as well as the final event, attracted a more diverse audience in terms of age and professional background.

GC In your opinion, what does Art Club project do well, and where could it improve?

AK I think the Art Club project has worked as an experiment in interaction among communities of people professionally active in different fields, as well as with part of the museum's audience coming from similar backgrounds. From this perspective, I find the project truly exciting. What didn't work, but can be improved in the future, is the communication and structuring of the project itself. I missed being able to interact with members of other Art Club groups and not having had the opportunity for exchange.

GC How did the project idea deviate from the initial premises?

AK For our group, the reduction in financial support and in the staff available to support us, led to a reduction in the number of activities proposed. However, we are quite satisfied with having managed to keep the project largely intact as we initially presented it.

GC And have your personal expectations changed?

AK When we began, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. Our goal was to build a community, attracting a fresh audience to experience the museum in novel ways. However, we encountered various obstacles — structural, logistical, organizational, and financial — that prevented us from fully achieving our objectives. I had hoped for clearer guidance, considering my role was initially defined as advisory within Museion, rather than having to develop a format from scratch without specific instructions. Moreover, I had expected more effective communication both within and between different groups, including external members and the institution itself.

Expectations for the future of Art Club? Perhaps that we will be able to find a more effective system of communication and exchange, that we will be able to combine the strengths and skills of the members by creating teamwork, even if it means fewer activities, but with a more impactful and interconnected approach.

GC Would you change other aspects of Art Club?

AK Certainly, additional adjustments are possible, but implementing them might entail further experimentation and, consequently, new challenges. One option could involve appointing dedicated individuals, both from within and outside the organization, to provide ongoing supervision for the Art Club project. These individuals could be supported by consultants to assist with project ideation. Alternatively, we could simplify the projects and consolidate the objectives of the three groups into a unified Art Club initiative. This approach would enable a more coherent program of activities and better alignment with the themes developed.

GC Michael, could you start by introducing yourself and your practice?

MS I'm a performance artist, both as a practitioner and as a curator and producer. My role involves assisting and producing other performers, performing for other artists, and working on my own personal projects. I believe this hybrid practice could be of interest to Museion. I'm not just an artist; production is an integral part of my artistic expression. Additionally, performance art has been underrepresented in the museum until now, so my presence adds a previously missing dimension. This also applies to other disciplines integrated into Museion through Art Club members, such as electronic music, poetry, or publishing.

GC When you were invited to be part of the Art Club, why did you accept? What potential or relevance did you see in it?

MS I had been looking for a space and a way to collaborate with other creative people in the area for some time. With Art Club, I saw an opportunity to experiment and create something unique that wasn't yet present in Bolzano or South Tyrol. What I appreciate most about these projects is their openness and lack of defined boundaries. They offer possibilities that a more rigidly structured project wouldn't. When intentions are already clear, you're merely executing tasks, whereas in our case, there was a need to take risks and push boundaries. The museum itself had to figure out how to best support our endeavors.

For *Opening the Pill*, we received a budget of 15,000 euros. The program we had developed cost exactly twice as much, and Frida absolutely did not want to exceed the agreed-upon amount. As a group, we insisted and finally presented the project in its entirety to the management. The money was secured by reallocating funds from other projects. At that time, the museum itself was exploring various directions and had no defined expectations. The fact that it was us, outsiders, who prepared the budgets is evidence that these were practices the museum had not previously employed, and therefore, had no frame of reference, as they had never worked with those disciplines. The initial budget we created together now serves as a template for future events.

GC With respect to the gap you were talking about and that you felt in the area, Art Club was created as a hub to offer a space where people who live in the area can meet and, at the same time, those who come from outside can identify it as a gathering project. You are originally from Bolzano but live elsewhere. What does this project mean to you?

MS I can provide insights specifically about the local performer community, which is relatively small in size. There is another space in the region that deals with participatory practices, Centrale Fies. Every year, when I go there for the Festival, I always meet artists with whom I have already collaborated. I know the practices, the discourses, and it creates a sense of feeling *at home*. It's about aesthetics, discourses, and practices that are shared on a broader scale, not limited to a provincial dimension but aiming for international reflection. These are then interpreted and reimagined on a local level, adding a 'local flavor' to international ideas and creating a more nuanced mapping. In Bolzano, there's a wealth of organisations and entities, from the university to experiences like Hotel Amazonas on the Ritten. However, there's a lack of spaces where people can come together, despite the desire for it. Everything seems to have its own place, but there's a need for spaces where individuals can discover themselves

GC In this respect, do you think Art Club has managed to create a change?

MS In my view, Art Club has so far only managed to offer a sense of possibility. This stems from how the members of Art Club approached the request and how the institution presented the proposal. During the first year, we didn't really have the opportunity to discuss and share a unified vision on the processes. The museum pushed for the production of events to justify the investment and demonstrate results. Now that the first year has passed and we have proven our skills and professionalism, there's an opportunity to pause and reconsider how we can make Art Club more effective in achieving its objectives.

GC You are touching on a point that I think is very important, which is the radical nature of this initiative. As you said, at the beginning of the mandate it was not clearly defined whether we were consultants or whether the invitation could have a broader scope in rethinking the mandate of an institution like the museum. Over the months, the experimental and critical aspects of this project had to be scaled down in the name of feasibility, both in terms of money, manpower, time, and energy. While the formats we developed are indeed interesting and impactful, they still align closely with what Museion could have accomplished even without our involvement.

MS However, I wonder whether Museion could really have achieved all that was presented on its own.

GC Probably not. But then, what is our role? Are we merely a workforce producing something the museum lacked the time, energy, or budget to develop?

MS No, but at the same time, I share this position to a certain extent. Often, what I perceive, even in conversations with other members of Art Club, is an antagonistic mindset, an opposition between 'us' and 'them'. However, I am much more interested in acknowledging that the institution has brought us to the negotiation table. Despite any differences in formal power dynamics, there's room for discussion. The museum has provided us with a platform for dialogue. As external members of Art Club, we felt overwhelmed by the top-down demands from the museum - creating budgets, conceptualizing ideas, presenting projects, and constantly responding to requests. This overwhelming situation caused us to lose focus. The perception is that of having merely completed a task and acting as a workforce. However, building a relationship takes time. Sometimes, you start with familiar formats, and as mutual trust develops, you can explore new formats. The perception then is that of having performed a task and being a workforce. But at the same time, a relationship is something that takes time and sometimes you start with formats you already know, and once you get to know each other and a relationship of trust takes over, you can move on to other formats.

Viewing this process from another perspective, the establishment of Art Club also shook up the museum's structure. We're all a bit unsettled. So, in my opinion, while the radical proposal you desire can happen, it may not happen immediately. If we had proposed it from the outset, the museum might have faced closure; it might have been too much, too soon. Instead, there's a need to test the waters, both on our side and the museum's, before pushing further. We need to understand the financial limits and specific aspects we can advocate for. After a year of working at the museum, I've started to grasp the boundaries and limits. Similarly, within our group, we're smoothly organizing the third event on the calendar. We've learned how to collaborate effectively, leveraging each other's skills.

We need the group to collectively reflect on aesthetic, formal, and thematic decisions. For specific tasks, we can work individually to minimize the need for frequent meetings. That's why I'm hesitant about starting a second Art Club working group right now. Building relationships takes time, and now is the time for real progress. The institution has identified emerging needs and how to address them, while we've figured out our path forward. It's time for dialogue: as external members, we're ready to offer critical feedback and constructive input. Our results justify the project, attracting interest and new audiences, which gives us the trust to advocate for further improvements. Now is the right time for meaningful growth and reception.

GC What would you change about Art Club?

MS Certainly, I suggest revisiting our timeline for these processes, as they require consistent effort and attention. One recurring issue I've highlighted in our meetings is the lack of a cohesive theme or ongoing narrative across the Art Club's proposals. I propose returning to our original format: a collaborative forum where we brainstorm together to develop cohesive ideas and plans. This approach would ensure that our projects align more closely, leading to a clearer and more recognizable programming schedule, perhaps even on a monthly basis.

GC A lot of energy has been invested in thinking and producing the projects, but the aspect of creating an Agora for exchange and dialogue between members, both internal and external, has completely failed.

MS Exactly. That's what we are actually trying to start with, with the request to meet each other informally. One important point to consider is that, in my opinion, these meetings shouldn't take place outside the museum. Instead, we should pave the way for the idea that we can hold these informal gatherings within the museum itself. We could reserve a room or meet in the Passage. We need to establish a sense that we have access to Museion, allowing us to utilize the spaces as needed, depending on availability. This is where the museum begins to feel like home, becoming a hub for encounters and exchanges. We shouldn't have to rely on a café to facilitate this. It's about fostering a habit, making it a spontaneous and recurring occurrence.

GC This to me is another key point: museums have been completely rethinking themselves for some time to become participatory platforms. The Art Club project is part of these processes. However, a friction always persists between the museums being highly professionalised sites of expertise and becoming spaces for collective discussion. Art Club exemplifies this fracture: it is not clear exactly how much it is an autonomous forum and how much it is embedded in the museum.

MS But, as you say, it is our responsibility. For me, the *Opening the Pill* project was successful precisely in its dialogue with the museum. The institutional posters and the poster-action we organized were developed and designed with similar aesthetics, both in terms of color and themes. Another example of our collaboration was the sharing of the budget itself. The museum utilized part of the funds allocated for the ongoing exhibition to support some of the artists invited to our public program events. To emphasize this collaboration, for instance, the talks were integrated directly within the ~~*Kingdom*~~ *of the Ill* exhibition. It's intriguing to engage in an open dialogue with the institution, exploring

how we can mutually participate in research processes and create interdisciplinary connections.

For example, during the *Longing for Belonging* event, the durational performance *La Casa* by Aitana Cordero will start during the day and extend into the evening, allowing it to be viewed by both the museum's regular audience and those attending solely for the final performance. Additionally, there is an intention to organize a political debate concurrently, expected to engage another public. This setup enables us to reach and involve different audiences, introducing them to various forms of expression. It allows people with different interests to mingle and encounter experiences they might not otherwise have. Personally, I find the Art Club project incredibly interesting and full of potential. We've reached a point in our relationship, both with the institution and among the working groups, where we can take things further. We can adopt a more critical stance and perhaps cultivate a more symbiotic relationship, as you mentioned. I'm curious to see if the museum will soon launch a second edition of Art Club.

GC In my opinion everything is still quite frozen. I don't know the final details, but the director's intention seemed to me to temporarily put the Forum in a dormant phase and have the new programming start in November 2024. This pause would allow a period of deeper exchange and reflection, enabling us to thoroughly assess what has been accomplished so far and identify the necessary adjustments for the next edition.

MS Creating a *Museion Parliament* could foster open dialogue and diverse collaboration approaches. This might involve smaller, focused groups with flexible structures and increased participation. For instance, we could try a speed-dating format for groups, mixing elements and revisiting discussions. Each group could then share insights to cultivate shared interests and outcomes.

GC What impact do you think we can generate and then integrate into the museum with this project?

MS The way we operate involves crafting events around themes that resonate with people, sparking reflection and discussion on topics of interest. Additionally, we engage in collaborations with local associations, institutions, and students in the area. Every relationship is built on repetition, intimacy, and fulfilled expectations. Unlike interpersonal relationships, museums typically lack this consistent presence. However, if Art Club events were held more regularly, they could achieve even greater success by offering something unique to the local community. Museion's central location makes it easily accessible, and regular, branded events would enhance recognition and expand our network. We've engaged with

numerous students, providing them with valuable experiences to enhance their CVs, and compensated them accordingly. I can envision a forum where interested individuals pay an annual fee of 1,000 euros to discuss proposals periodically. Depending on availability, we can reconsider their implementation, involving additional professionals as needed.

GC The original idea proposed by Museion was to gather individuals for a collaborative project akin to a *Forum for Ideas*. However, it seems that this envisioned structure did not materialize as intended.Then somehow the structure imploded.

MS I believe it also depends on the types of activities we're undertaking. With workshops, once the collaboration is set up, it's simpler to assign the production tasks to others. However, for projects organized by the Content group, where formats often involve a mix of elements, the creation happens as part of the process itself. This makes it hard to neatly separate the planning and conceptualization from the production and execution. While we can identify different roles, complete delegation isn't always practical.

GC Maybe what's lacking is a common understanding and vision of our objectives.

MS Yes. The Art Club project was well-conceived on paper, but now it's being confronted with the realities and actual needs of the community. While there was a sense of urgency to produce results, there was also a need for community building. Now that we've had a chance to get acquainted, it's time to sit down and dialogue. The informal meetings that you have just initiated are a good attempt to foster this exchange.

Flavio Pintarelli
External Member of the Content group

GC Flavio, could you start by introducing yourself and explaining your practice?

FP I consider writing to be my primary artistic practice. In my professional life, I work independently as a consultant, focusing on strategic marketing and communication.

GC Why did you decide to join the Art Club? What potential and relevance do you see in it in relation to the contemporary and local scene?

FP I welcomed the Art Club project with great enthusiasm. I've long felt that Museion has been somewhat detached from the public life of the city and the region as a whole. Providing such a strong platform to a multifold group of local creatives, thinkers, activists, and cultural influencers struck me as both impactful and forward-thinking. I wanted to be involved to see if it truly lived up to its potential.

GC Did you attend Museion before joining Art Club?

FP I didn't visit Museion much before Art Club. Under the previous management, the exhibitions mainly featured individual artists rather than thematic exhibitions. I don't keep up with the latest news and trends in contemporary art, but instead focus on issues and key topics of discussion. The different curatorial approach of the museum, coinciding with the launch of Art Club, drew me closer to Museion and its activities.

GC Has your relationship with the museum changed since you've been involved in curating its public program?

FP Definitely. I've gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for the challenges involved in organizing activities within a public institution, which operates with a level of complexity and responsibility that differs significantly from the more independent and unconventional practices I was accustomed to.

GC How were the projects developed within the Content group?

FP The projects developed within the working group were the result of continuous dialogue and exchange. This ongoing conversation posed a challenge for me as I am used to working independently or within structured decision-making processes. However, this dialogue also proved to be a strength as each project benefited from a variety of perspectives and ideas, which became shared and collective. Looking back, it would be difficult to pinpoint individual contributions to a specific project..

GC What is/has been the response to the activities developed and proposed?

FP The response has exceeded my expectations. Each project has received an overwhelmingly positive response from diverse audiences.

GC In what aspects does the Art Club project succeed, and in which ways does it fall short?

FP For me, the Art Club project has succeeded in providing external participants with a substantial platform for advancing both theoretical and artistic discourse. However, it has faced challenges in organizational aspects. Being the inaugural Art Club group, I observed how the absence of shared structure and policies led to ambiguity and dysfunction, complicating many processes. Furthermore, the Content group, to which I belong, lacked a clear mandate compared to the other two editorial groups, which was also a less functional aspect.

GC How has the project deviated from its premises?

FP Undoubtedly, the workload required to carry out the projects has exceeded what was initially anticipated, and the agreed compensation has been insufficient to cover this effort. However, it's important to note that I've always felt free to make decisions, so the scope of the projects is the result of a deliberate choice rather than constraint.

GC Have your expectations changed during the course of the project?

FP From my perspective, my expectations have been met to a great extent. Art Club has facilitated my professional growth by providing exposure to an institution like Museion. It has also allowed me to bring various projects, including personal ones, to fruition, which I wouldn't have been able to achieve independently. This experience has significantly contributed to the development of my thinking and practice.

GC Would you change anything about Art Club?

FP Yes, many things. One above all, the creation of a clear and shared policy for its members.

GC Alex, could you start by introducing yourself and telling me what you do?

AG I work at the Center for Addiction Prevention as a pedagogical collaborator. I am involved in various projects and workshops for young people, mainly focusing on preventing online hate, cyberbullying, and other types of online discrimination.

As for my artistic practice, I have been doing spoken word and poetry performances for many years, both as a solo artist and as a participant in poetry slams and Lesebühnen, both as a participant and as an event moderator.

GC Why did you decide to join Art Club? What potential and relevance do you see in it compared to the contemporary and local scene?

AG In South Tyrol, we have a very strong and vibrant underground scene. While many complain about the lack of offerings in the Province, I disagree. Considering the size of South Tyrol and its connection to various communities in the valleys, I believe a lot is happening here. Much of this local contemporary culture is not valued as an asset to the area and lacks visibility. The *Techno* exhibition and the establishment of Art Club gave me the impression for the first time that one of the major institutions active in the region was finally willing to provide visibility and space for the underground and small creative scenes, beyond what is already an established culture. This aspect was what motivated me.

GC Did you attend Museion before joining Art Club?

AG Before joining Art Club, I didn't visit Museion as frequently as I do now. Occasionally over the years, I attended exhibitions that caught my interest. However, I viewed Museion more as a place where I could find something interesting, rather than as a living organism. My engagement with it typically ended after experiencing an exhibition

GC And now?

AG Now I feel like I have a relationship with Museion. Being part of Art Club and involved in its programming makes me feel like the museum is also a bit mine. It's more accessible, not just offering me something, but it's like a home where there's something that belongs to me inside.

GC You are part of the New Audiences group: was it clear from the beginning what you would have to develop regarding Art Club's programming? And how was the project developed within your working group?

AG At the outset, our group felt we had a greater degree of freedom. Unlike the Public Program group, which had fixed events like openings, and the Content group, which focused on the symposium format, our brief was more open-ended. Our first task was defining our target audience — whom we identified as individuals aged 20 to 35, coinciding with our own age range. The second point was understanding what could be interesting for our target audience, namely the creative community present in the South Tyrol area.

GC How did you develop the proposal? What formats did you envision?

AG We created a format called *Museion Factory*, comprising a series of participatory residencies. Our goal was to offer stimuli and inputs to support the development of our local communities in the areas that interested us, addressing the shortage of creative spaces in the region. Art Club was an ideal venue to host these initiatives.

GC How often and how do you choose the content to propose?

AG We have three residencies scheduled each year and two small workshops in collaboration with local artists. We decided to draw from the disciplines that we represent. This way, we could serve as multipliers for Art Club. For instance, I represent the spoken word scene, Andrea represents theater, and Ada represents design.

GC How do the residencies work?

AG The residencies last for five days, during which there are workshops for groups ranging from 8 to 15 people. The guest artist brings methodological and thematic inputs related to the theme of the relationship between body and language, which is the overarching theme of our research project. The residencies almost become a small festival: during the five days of activities, in addition to the workshop, we organize a dinner with the artist, which becomes a public event open to everyone, and a final presentation of what was developed during the residency in the form of a small exhibition.

GC What is the feedback to the activities developed and proposed?

AG The feedback has been very positive. We were quite ambitious in our programming, and a calendar as richly structured as ours

wasn't easy to communicate solely through an online post or a poster. It took effort in communication: it wasn't enough to offer an interesting proposal; it was also important to find a way to effectively communicate what we were doing.

The audience varied from residency to residency, depending on the type of activity proposed. For the first residency I organized on spoken word with the artist Otis Mensah, there were participants I already knew from the local scene, but also individuals active in the area who came from distant places and whom I hadn't yet had the chance to connect with. Museion certainly acted as an amplifier to inform audiences about these events.

GC In your opinion, what does Art Club project do well, and where could it improve?

AG There's a perception among my contacts that Museion is opening up. Art Club has helped refresh the institution's image. However, being a public museum with complex bureaucratic mechanisms somewhat limits the potential of what the project could be. I believe Art Club could benefit from more disconnection from Museion, becoming an autonomous association with its own separate economic system and independent administrative structure. If Museion were merely a physical space and framework for content, but nothing more, that would be perfect.

GC If you could, would you change anything about Art Club?

AG I would take things slower, if possible, with a mandate one year longer. Not being too ambitious but developing work for the long term and with smaller goals. The demand to be ready after just six months and to produce a lot of content has led us to overload ourselves with work and expectations.

GC How has the project idea deviated from the initial premises, and how have your expectations changed during the work?

AG My expectations have been on a rollercoaster ride. Initially, I was very skeptical about the premises and feasibility of the project, as we were given a lot of freedom. For a long time, we were told that almost anything was possible. We eventually found a middle ground between my skepticism and what was actually achievable. For a pilot project, with people who had never collaborated before, placed in a public institution that had just changed direction, I would say we achieved excellent results. I'm happy with the feedback from the residency participants and the input the artists brought to South Tyrol. Both Art Club and Museion were indispensable in this regard. I feel that the proposal we developed is very well received by the audience in Bolzano. We should now reach other communities beyond the city.

Of course, not everything could be accomplished, which would have been unrealistic anyway. But the initial freedom we were given allowed us to push the boundaries of what we could achieve as an output.

GC How do you think the project's communication has worked?

AG Museion already existed as an institution, but it had a somewhat static image, both in my perception and in that of the local community. Art Club introduced a new layer of openness to the museum. The challenge was communicating this change, as it was something unexpected compared to the museum's previous activities. Typically, one wouldn't expect events such as residencies, parties, or symposiums to be held at Museion.

The amount of activities we initiated posed a communication challenge. Previously, Museion had been relatively quiet for years, and then suddenly, within a short period, there was a sudden burst of activity. This rapid change made it difficult to effectively communicate everything that was happening. Moreover, there wasn't a transitional phase; Art Club began immediately after the pandemic. I believe we're still in the process of establishing awareness of Art Club and ensuring its ongoing presence.

Conversations

Appendix #2

The Audience Does Not Exist in Itself

In Conversation with Mirko Zardini

Mirko Zardini has been the director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal from 2005 to 2020. He played a significant role in establishing it as a focal point for international architectural discourse and its implications. During his tenure, he pursued a self-critical and anti-institutional museum practice, questioning the activities, procedures and tools of a cultural institution.

GC Could you begin by introducing when you arrived at the CCA and what the museum was like at that time?

MZ I started in 2003 as a curator and became director in 2005. At the time, the CCA was a very traditional structure, linked in terms of cultural policy to a traditional vision of architecture museums. It was linked to the North Atlantic - the United States and England - with a strong local focus. This was also due to the museum's founder, Phyllis Lambert,[1] who played a key role in the defence of local heritage. Québec is still characterized by its commitment to safeguarding national identity and ongoing secessionist movements from Canada.

In the early 2000s, the audience of the CCA consisted mainly of a conventional, upper-middle class audience in Montreal, aged between 40 and 50, interested in the subject matter but not specialized, who found a kind of local identity in the monographic exhibitions presented and in the work of maintaining local archives. The programmes were very traditional, with historical and monographic exhibitions.

GC How did you decide to intervene in this context?

MZ The operation was primarily cultural, involving the determination of the institution's international positioning and its engagement in the debates of the time. We completely shifted away from the concept of monographic exhibitions and a traditional approach to architectural history, both in our research and presentations. Additionally, we moved beyond a classical interpretation of the museum's educational role, particularly targeted at students, such as those in primary or high school. The decision was made for the CCA to focus on themes pertinent to contemporary discussions. For instance, this included addressing the energy crisis with *Sorry, Out of Gas* (2007), researching migration phenomena with *Journeys* (2010), exploring community participation in urban transformations with *Actions: What You Can Do With the City* (2008), or offering a broader exploration of the environment as an architectural experience with *Sense of the City* (2005). Additionally, a series of exhibitions explored the integration of new technological tools in architecture, developed through the research project *Archaeology of the Digital* (2013). This project specifically examined a period in recent history, between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, and delved into the rise of a distinct architectural concept associated with the advent of new digital tools. It particularly focused on the development of the so-called 'blob' and the resulting fluid forms enabled by this software.

1 The CCA was founded in 1979 by the Canadian architect Phyllis Lambert in a significant period for architecture institutions, characterised by the emergence of many dedicated museums. These included the NAi in Rotterdam, the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt and the Getty Centre in Los Angeles. The International Confederation of Architecture Museums (ICAM) was also founded in 1979.

GC How did the work of the CCA differ from other contemporary institutions?

MZ The CCA was probably one of the few institutions that focused on contemporary content and did so with a different approach and vision. Other institutions, such as the NAi in Rotterdam (now known as Het Nieuwe Instituut), engaged as well in discussions about contemporary issues, but proposed architecture as the solution to problems. For me it was impossible to discuss the problems of these crises and to propose architecture — when I say architecture, I include urban design, planning, cities, photography, landscape architecture, geography, everything that relates in some way to the idea of the physical environment — as the solution to the problems, because it itself was part of the problem.

It was important for me to reflect on this ambiguity underlying the work of architects, based on the fact that they were dragging along ideas, visions and strategies that had been elaborated substantially decades before and that did not contribute to the solution of these problems. For instance, in the case of health, it was clear that a large part of the projects presented by architects in North America reflected a strongly neo-liberal vision that regarded health as an individual moral problem. In addressing the issue of obesity, the legislation – first introduced in New York and then in Toronto and elsewhere – applied to many architects' designs, suggested hiding the presence of lifts in buildings to force people to use stairs. However, this perspective was narrow and obscured the reality that the issue of health was primarily a social and economic problem, rather than solely the responsibility of the individual.

Through the work developed at CCA, I wanted to reveal the positioning of architectural culture and the tools this practice adopts in design. It was important to reflect on these aspects as something to be changed profoundly, both in architectural thinking and practice, because tools are not neutral. With my work, I was therefore interested in defining problems, rather than claiming to offer solutions. If we tackle important issues with old tools, we will probably not find an interesting solution. We need to rethink the way we frame problems, but also anticipate emerging problems and use different tools to address them. All the research components of the CCA have been oriented in this direction to reach a very clear position. As an institution, we have an ethical responsibility towards the problems we are facing, and the institution must take certain political positions.

These statements should then be followed by a cultural revolution in the way architecture looks at problems: developing new tools, new attitudes and new types of research. At CCA we have tried to frame contemporary problems differently, to have a critical attitude towards the way architects work and to show the inherent contradictions. Do we have the solution? No. But we think the only way to try to find solutions is to build a new kind of platform.

GC What were the consequences of this renewed approach?

MZ There were changes on multiple levels. First of all, this new strategy at the CCA — such as the shift in thematic focus or the critique of architectural discipline — necessitated a significant transformation in the organisation of research. This entailed, for instance, resistance in the collaboration with universities regarding the thematic focus of research on contemporary issues. This often led to conflicts with many university programs that favored traditional approaches. Consequently, much of the research was conducted by the CCA and then took shape in exhibitions and publications.

The operational dynamics within the CCA also underwent a transformation: the conventional institutional processes — research, exhibitions and publications, acquisitions and cataloguing — no longer followed a linear chronological sequence, as in the past, but instead operated simultaneously. Moreover, the fact that the CCA is located in Montreal, in a context marked by a strong identity problem, entailed decisions and responsibilities. To limit itself to responding to the officially declared needs of the community would have meant that the institution would have had to pursue a policy of promoting local architecture and defending its heritage, thus neglecting other types of interests. In my opinion, however, the role of an institution is not just to respond to the declared demands of the community but to create its own public. An institution must take responsibility for defining its own discourse, assuming the consequences and helping to shift the discourse to issues or problems that it considers relevant.

GC How did you foster such a practice?

MZ The online presence was a key component to complement the publications, expanding the curatorial and editorial strategy and offering access to the CCA's collection, research and activities to a geographically dispersed audience. From an ethical point of view, the investments that led to the creation of the CCA would not be justifiable on the basis of the number of visitors who can physically access the building. When we introduced digital technology at CCA, we imagined the institution to consist of two buildings. Two different buildings, which partly overlapped and partly did not. A physical building, in which certain activities, research and productions were carried out and accessed by a certain type of audience. And a second digital building, in which part of those discourses were developed, but in different ways and in dialogue with an audience on a global scale. This meant no longer tying the institution to its regional presence or the occasional visits by tourists, but rethinking it as part of an international context, with its own niche audience interested in the topics developed. The vision with respect to digital was essentially editorial. This reflection was not limited to the

CCA but was also shared by other institutions in those years. In UK, for instance, there was the debate between the British Museum and the Tate, where the future of museums was envisioned as broadcasting stations. But in my opinion to refer to a broadcasting model is a very 20th century idea, like a television station with its own scheduled programs. What is required is not merely broadcasting; it entails constructing a distinct form of digital environment. To me, digital platforms needs to operate as an editorial product, with all their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, I aimed to avoid the interaction with the audience resolving itself into the usual blogs and conversations.

GC What distinguishes the CCA digital presence from other institutions is the fact that its website not only informs visitors about what is happening in the physical building, but also presents concepts and complementary narratives. Sometimes there is an overlap with some of the research and activities that take place within the CCA, but other initiatives materialise on the website independently of the other physical results...

MZ Yes, the website served as a platform to share critical issues we aimed to foster discussion and debate about. It was meant to be a space to instigate reflections and discussions. We organized it into three sections: the primary one, the publication platform, is the first section you encounter on the homepage and is where we present these types of reflections. The second part, the traditional communication component of the institution, is limited. It's structured as a timeline — a sort of institutional archive — depicting the history of the CCA through its past endeavors. The third part is a powerful research tool that provides access to all the activities of the CCA: the collection, the archives of prints and drawings, photography, books, and ephemera. But also exhibitions, publications, conferences, seminars.For me, these were the two most radical aspects of the project: the fact that the primary page is a publishing project that represents the institution through its ideas and approach to research, and that the entire collection and holdings of the library are simultaneously interrogated in a single interface. For instance, the publications section comprises materials and contributions stemming from CCA research, collections, or activities, alongside contributions from our external network. This page of the site is user-oriented, aiming to facilitate both research and discovery. Users have the option to create a personalized selection to aid in individual research and curatorial projects. We have tried to develop researches that exploit this kind of 'second building,' providing researchers the opportunity to collaborate with us online. This enables us to forge connections with curators, establishing a physical and dynamic network within this digital space. Thus, the website serves not only as a channel for dissemination and publication, but also as vehicle for generating content through a geographically dispersed network of individuals collaborating with the CCA.

GC What was the purpose of the second building?

MZ The second building is designed to offer the possibility of a broader conversation. As mentioned, this 'second building' was meant to be different from the physical one, in order to create internal conflict, and a productive friction. One of the risks of the institution is to stabilize itself around a permanent idea. The constant friction between the online and the physical inevitably allowed the institution to move forward. The CCA in Montreal is a sort of laboratory where certain activities and ideas are developed, while the electronic publications, the website, the social media presence are all elements of this second building. However, I must admit that this operation was not a complete success: the website and social media were not managed as they should have been.

GC Could you expand on what you mean?

MZ It was very difficult to abandon a traditional website or social media model, as they are usually conceived by an institution, in favour of a purely editorial mechanism. Social media functioned too conventionally; the curators did not adequately develop this kind of strategy. The digital transition was an operation that involved deep internal conflict for the CCA: some curators clearly feared losing authority in the face of new communication methods. The need was to initiate a smooth transition of this process. And the web as an editorial product did not really work as I would have wished, both in terms of its conceptualization and in its engagement with the public to establish connections with a different audience. The process has been much longer and slower than imagined. However, I am convinced of the value of the decisions made and the necessity of establishing this second digital structure.

GC How does the CCA's digital approach distinguish itself from that of other similar museums?

MZ Frequently museums use digital technology to reinforce existing marketing and education initiatives. In many instances, digital technology has not functioned as a transformative tool, but rather as a means of consolidating and expanding upon established strategies. Institutions often attempt to broaden their audience reach, but without substantially changing the content and form of their offerings. If we consider, for instance, the use of digital formats in recent exhibitions at Cooper Hewitt, this approach merely extends the storytelling of objects through digital screens. These are very expensive, and often boring, interventions. On the contrary, in my opinion, digital formats have much far greater transformative potential than what is typically realized through

such approaches. It's evident that museums face challenges related to the digitization of their materials and ensuring their accessibility. However, it's equally clear that permanent or temporary exhibitions developed with the assistance of digital technology, as recently conceived, represent costly solutions that quickly become outdated.

Today, all institutions – universities, museums, libraries – must undergo reevaluation, not solely within their local contexts as previously done, but on a much broader international scale. Libraries are moving in this direction and some of them are developing very interesting strategies to provide content on a global scale. Even an institution like the CCA has to go in this direction: everything we do is a way to produce a new discourse, new content, new material for a wider discussion. For us, an exhibition is never a goal in itself, a publication is never a goal in itself. Our goal is to build a new discourse. The technological transformations we are facing, along with the constantly evolving tools available to us, are interesting. I observe is that frequently, these new possibilities are assimilated and employed by institutions to reinforce an outdated concept of what an institution should be: the 20th century idea of a museum or university. I think the *Open University* in Britain in the 1960s was far more revolutionary than most institutions today, despite the advent of new opportunities provided by social media, online presence, and other developments.

GC It seems that for you the use of digital technology serves as a platform for sparking discussions, while the 'real world' provides a space where these discussions might resonate with audiences...

MZ Yes. But it could also be the other way around. Relationships can go both ways. In the real world, interactions involve physical contexts, encounters with other individuals, and engagement with tangible objects or documents. Conversely, the digital realm resembles more closely the concept of a publication, where the focus is on conveying content rather than the physical reality of objects. While both mediums address similar themes and issues, they are developed in a manner akin to how a publication or newspaper would present them.

Museums always have the problem of the physical object, yet the discussion surrounding these objects need not be confined to the museum space alone. Institutions must reconsider their political stance, clearly articulating their roles and positions within contemporary discourse. Moreover, they should move away from viewing digital technology solely as a tool to reinforce existing marketing, education, and communication methods within the museum, and instead exploit it in innovative ways.

GC For instance, considering it as an extension of their physical space?

MZ Exactly.

GC The CCA digital archive seems to be an operational tool, a pretext to create a debate on contemporaneity. Would you agree on this take?

MZ The CCA's collection, exhibitions, publications, online presence, and research are not goals in themselves but tools to develop a discourse. I am absolutely convinced that museums today are tasked not only with preservation, research, communication, and education, but also with prioritizing research as a central theme. Moreover, it is crucial to enhance and update the tools at the disposal of museums. Hence, the focus should not only be on collection acquisition, archive preservation, and their display to the public via permanent or temporary exhibitions, but also on editorial activity, both on paper and online. The latter naturally utilizes a variety of channels, from traditional websites to social media. I am absolutely convinced of the importance of this approach. I believe that museums, architectural centers, and archives have not yet engaged in the level of reflection that libraries, for example, have undertaken in recent years. For instance, I am thinking of the work in North America by David Lankes. The focus should now extend beyond the mere collection and physical objects to encompass knowledge production. What we do with the material of which we become custodians and responsible is crucial. Most importantly, these materials come with a responsibility — to openly declare the values, themes, and objectives guiding our work, abandoning any pretense of neutrality.

GC Do you perceive a lack of clear positioning from museums today?

MZ Yes. Very often institutions reproduce an alleged neutrality within the contemporary debate. But institutions are never neutral, their positioning is always political. In my opinion, it is necessary to clearly state this positioning. The idea of institutional neutrality is unrealistic; every institution should have the courage to establish its own distinct and identifiable voice. The current discussions on inclusivity being carried out by institutions are, once again, an impossible project. The idea of maintaining a status above the parties by claiming to include all possible diverse voices is unthinkable. Instead, the institution can foster diverse interpretations and narratives that conflict with one another, illustrating the impossibility of a singular narrative. By revealing and embracing spaces of conflict and difference, the institution can demonstrate the complexity of societal components. It is unrealistic for an institution to claim total inclusiveness of our society. The museum must simply accept to initiate different narratives, even conflicting ones, by revealing precisely these conflicts. an institution cannot position itself as detached from these realities, attempting to mirror the world in a politically correct

manner from a distance. The institution must have a voice; it must actively engage and construct its audience. The museum initiates a dialogue with its voice, and this process should then evolve by expanding the discourse in various directions.

For instance, with respect to the educational role of the institution, my idea was to eliminate the concept of education and to introduce the concept of conversation. At CCA there are no longer programs solely dedicated to educating diverse audiences about architecture; instead, conversations are activated. These conversations are subsequently expanded through workshops focused on topics pertinent to the institution, engaging diverse audiences. Here, the museum takes the lead in initiating discourse, but the manner in which this discourse unfolds is dialogic and experimental, rather than purely educational. I wanted to avoid providing already defined formats and contents with respect to the audience.

GC What I have always admired about the CCA is its commitment to respecting its audience, engaging them in discourse, and fostering productive dialogues. For instance, in the publication *The Museum is Not Enough* (Borasi et al. 2019) the institution avoids traditional hierarchies and speaking about itself in the first person, acknowledging that it cannot teach but seeks dialogue partners instead. In line with this, in a recent interview, you affirmed that "the audience does not exist in itself, each institution builds its own audience, or rather its own different kinds of audience" (Ricci 2020). How did you achieve this result at CCA?

MZ It was undoubtedly quite a long process and it radically changed the audience. Those who initially frequented the CCA locally have left the museum. Today the CCA refers to a younger public, engaging both online and in direct interaction with the physical institution. This audience actively participates in museum visits, debates, and workshops, initiating a series of conversations, which has always been more difficult to achieve with digital formats. This shift underscores a fundamental transformation in the institution's culture. Initially rooted in a collection with a local focus, the CCA archive has evolved over time through donations, acquiring materials that diverge significantly from traditional architecture. For example, archives of historians or critics who approach architecture not only as a discipline but also as a subject of research. The collection comprises materials deliberately sourced from diverse contexts, including Japan, Portugal, Italy, and South America. Furthermore, there was an engagement with Africa, focusing less on acquisition and more on fostering relationships.

It is crucial today for an institution that aims to speak globally to be able to recognise the diversity, the specificities, the contributions

that come from different cultures. The programme of acquisitions from different countries and the *CCA c/o* project [2] were attempts to start a process of transforming the culture of the institution by exposing it to very different cultures. The institution was compelled to engage in dialogue and collaboration with curators from Portuguese, Japanese, and South American backgrounds, fostering a deeper engagement with these diverse cultures. This was done to prevent the institution from being characterized by a narrow perspective, incapable of comprehending and embracing the diversity inherent in the contemporary world. *CCA c/o* was certainly an attempt to establish relationships, but it was primarily an attempt to use these external energies to challenge the institutional culture of the museum itself, in order to make it more adequate. It aimed to initiate transformative processes to make the institution more responsive to a contemporary world that was significantly more diverse than the one it was used to. And thus also putting it in crisis: the institution, faced with these situations, could only listen, and respond to a dialogue that started from other assumptions.

These new extensions contributed to enriching the research, curatorial, and editorial work that underpinned CCA's activities. They were processes that struggled to start through the digital. *CCA c/o* was a hybrid format: it took place largely through online communication, but accelerated dialogue processes through a mix of people's real presence and the digital world. Unfortunately, these projects take a long time and changing the culture of an institution is a very long and complicated process.

GC You have been at the CCA for more than 15 years, a significant stretch of time. Do you detect a major gap between the work of the museum and the progress of society?

MZ The CCA has always been at the forefront of addressing emerging issues. All the issues that we have raised over time have been recognised and have become commonplace in the last 3-4 years. I am very happy about that. I think an institution can be *on time,* telling the same story that is being told at that moment, which means that the institution has a confirming role. Or it can be *late*, which means that the institution exploits an already developed discourse. But in my opinion, it is also the

2 CCA c/o are a series of temporary initiatives developed by CCA in cooperation with partners in different locations around the world. "We are interested in different ideas and perspectives emerging from different cultures and places. But we have little interest in the physical infrastructure and subservient relationship of museum franchises or satellites. Today a global institution must be thought of as a network, not a building. Agile and informal, CCA c/o sets down where an interesting architectural discussion is taking place and where a sympathetic partner can offer a unique perspective. The partnership is not necessarily established with museums or institutions. The partners can be independent curators, architects, journalists, photographers, editors. CCA c/o is a tool developed to share relevant questions in contexts other than the original one through which to define thematic explorations and new perspectives to ongoing collaborations. Projects activated so far have been CCA c/o Lisbon (2016-17), Tokyo (2018-2019), Buenos Aires (2020-21).

responsibility of an institution to anticipate issues slightly ahead of time, accelerating the emergence of these problems and encouraging collective discussion. I believe that the CCA has been successful in this respect. The challenge for the CCA is not to insist on this strategy but to understand what to do now. The themes we have analyzed encompass various aspects of a generalized crisis concerning health, the environment, safety, participation, and technology. In this context, what could be the role of an institution like the CCA to help develop a different disciplinary discourse? Architecture is not an autonomous discipline. On the one hand, it is a tool used to read contemporary – or past – society. On the other hand, society is a way of looking at architecture. My perspective on architecture opposes the notion of disciplinary autonomy. One of the prevailing challenges in architecture today is its tendency to assimilate various contemporary issues within a disciplinary culture that is largely fifty years old. As I mentioned, we need to envision different tools for addressing architectural concerns..

GC Do you not observe a similar tension within the museum community? Is there friction between the aspiration and necessity for significant change and the challenges associated with implementing and enacting it?

MZ It seems to me that all initiatives focus on the social role and inclusiveness of museums. But the fundamental issue that remains unaddressed is the inherent non-neutrality of museums. It is not possible to think institutions as neutral entities: they are always biased. By refusing to acknowledge this, they remain complicit in perpetuating the problem. When a museum runs an educational programme it claims to be neutral, to give an objective view of things, but this reveals a fear of conflict. It seems that the museum must always offer something that is unassailable.

GC During your tenure, you installed a quote by Gordon Matta-Clark at the entrance of the CCA: 'Here is what we have to offer you in its most elaborate form - confusion guided by a clear sense of purpose...'

MZ The challenge lies in defining what the CCA truly represents: it's not quite a conventional archive, nor a typical museum, nor a standard research center, yet it embodies elements of all three. Instead, the CCA serves as a prototype for a different kind of institution, one that exists as a project for an 'other.' Contemporary institutions still operate on the basis of 19th or 20th century ideas, whereas they need to be reinvented not only in technical terms but also in organisational terms. They should reconfigure the mission and mandate of the institution, its purpose and understanding of the world, and the communities these institutions serve. The technological transformations we are facing and the new tools that are constantly evolving are interesting, but very often these new possibilities are incorporated and used by institutions to re-establish an idea of the institution that already existed. When it comes to museums, these new opportunities are often used primarily to increase visitor numbers or to enhance online engagement with collections. While many institutions have indeed expanded their online content in recent years, I believe there's a pressing need to fundamentally reconsider what an institution is. It's essential to recognize that institutions must provide material for critical reflection and research online if they are to fulfill their role effectively and respond to the demands of the current era. This is an intellectual and ethical responsibility that institutions have towards our contemporary context. My concern is that technology is frequently adopted to serve conventional ends, rather than being utilized to deconstruct and reconstruct the existing institution in innovative ways. Which is what we have tried to do at CCA.

Trouble Maker

In Conversation with Lev Bratischenko

Lev Bratishenko is a journalist, curator, and cultural producer. He worked at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal (2007-2023), contributing to the conceivement and development of its exhibitions, publications, and online projects. He has been curatorial and research assistant, web editor, and head of the public program. Over the years he developed formats that challenged and interrogated the exchange with different audiences.

GC Could you start framing your relationship with the CCA and your practice?

LB I started at CCA in 2007 as a research assistant, working on exhibitions with Mirko Zardini – the director – and Giovanna Borasi - at the time the director of Program, the curatorial department. In 2010, they asked me to be the web editor of the new website, which was launched that same year. I attended meetings for its conceptualisation but was not actively involved in its realisation. The ambition was to have a magazine, a platform for publishing rather than just an informational tool. It was also a critical institutional tool for challenging some of the established divisions inside the museum. We didn't want to share the exact same structure outside as we use inside. We wanted to challenge some of the institutional divisions, through publishing or presenting them online. The idea was to create a platform. On one hand, it was a way to acknowledge the fact that the most important public for CCA was not, or no longer is, in Montreal. To accomplish what the institution claimed and wanted to do, it was necessary to connect with a global niche of architects, researchers, critics, students, all interested in international architecture. That's why a website capable of hosting contemporary conversations was necessary. Nevertheless, there has always been for me this underlying question: where does the real conversation take place? There isn't a dedicated comments section or a specific platform for meaningful exchange. Sometimes it happens in the YouTube comments or in the live chat on Zoom, but it's quite limited. I think this question has never been fully answered. There was never really an attempt to integrate a conversational aspect.

I also took care of the social media: I launched Twitter and we had a Tumblr and Facebook account. Instagram was included later on. It was just me and one other person, a small team, managing content in both English and French. It was a very exciting position: it was really like running a magazine, commissioning pieces to the other members of the institution. While it had potential, unfortunately, the response from the institution was not a generous outpouring of content, due to various complicated reasons. I think the original plan was to publish at least one article a week on the webpage, but we never managed to do that. I can recall a lot of challenges and complaints concerning the digital transformation processes.

After two years, as the web editor, I curated my first exhibition. The title was *404 error. The object is not online*. Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi explicitly challenged some of the traditional hierarchies and responsibilities within the museum, allowing us to work in a different way. It was a rewarding experience to contribute my perspective as a web editor to the exhibitions.

GC How did your role as web editor influence the outcome?

LB I have asked myself: what happens to objects when they're translated into the digital space? The question was obviously

related to what I was doing. The objects from the collection displayed in the exhibition were selected for their specific characteristics that met the exhibition's objective. But at that time CCA was developing *micro websites* for specific exhibitions. These sites operated independently from the main website, offering both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, they provided freedom from the constraints of the main site; however, they also required significant effort and expense to create and maintain. In this case, I had a rather limited budget, so we developed something very simple. The webpage consisted of a simple live feed from a camera mounted on the ceiling, offering a view of the gallery activities. While the image quality wasn't high-resolution, viewers could still observe people in the space. It was intentionally designed to be somewhat frustrating: remote users could witness others engaging more deeply with the exhibits. They could move their cursor, click on items to access additional images and information, but primarily, it aimed to highlight the limitations of remote engagement.

At the same time, within the exhibition space, a beamer projected the mouse cursors of online participants, serving as a subtle reminder of the parallel digital exhibition occurring. This aspect explains the title, *404 Error*, a nerd joke. The title refers to the code indicating a webpage's unavailability, echoing the absence of the physical objects online.

GC Your freedom to manage various aspects of projects, from website development to exhibition curation, seem quite unique. It's rare to cover wide range of responsibilities within an institution. Could this flexibility be attributed to the relatively small size of the center, allowing for more adaptable structures and workflows?

LB That's a good point. For instance, at CCA we engage designers as partners in the early stages of exhibition and book development. Unlike at other large museums, where projects are often completed before being handed over to institutional designers, at CCA we try to establish content conversations from the beginning. For the *404* show website, we involved the design studio Rumors from New York and we developed the idea of the simultaneous projection video together. The concept was conceived in dialogue with the project for the display. I don't know if that's something usual for the institutional capacity, but it was definitely a moment of unusual openness in the way of working.

Personally, I think I was in quite a privileged position: having prior experience with exhibitions, I was familiar with the team dynamics. Being the web editor, I knew already the context, which enabled me to think critically in ways that an outsider might have found more challenging. Maybe they would have been more extreme, maybe they would have been crazier, and I was actually being quite conservative, I don't know. But everything felt much smoother compared to other exhibitions, which really struggled to figure out how the structure is working. I believe Giovanna

and Mirko intended this experience to serve as a model for incorporating other roles within CCA, perhaps even guests, who typically aren't curators. But it didn't really happen.

GC Can you tell me more about your role as web editor? The museum website is both a huge archive of the entire collection and activities developed over the years by the museum and a publishing platform, right?

LB Yes. In terms of content, those are the two main parts. As well as institutional information, of course. We managed everything on the website with the director of Publications, Albert Ferré.

Each editor worked on one or two books a year, depending on the size of the book and how long it would take. And then we all, as a kind of editorial group, worked on the website. Initially, our work was much more about processing the content of the previous version of the website, deciding what to keep, and what to update to feed the new version. As soon as this previous process was concluded, we could actually start more of an ongoing editorial process on the themes, commissions, and collaborations we wanted to establish.

GC This dialogical aspect in museum practice seems a recurring element. At CCA, there's a continuous inquiry, both within the institution and with its audience, aimed at sharing diverse methods of knowledge production. You experiment with different formats to reach this goal: books, research programs, residencies, workshops, in addition to the exhibitions and public events...

LB I would say we are by design an unsettled institution, always asking ourselves what kind of institution we want to be, which means being OK with being uncomfortable. I think we have some productive contradictions: we are actually a stable institution, with a very solid foundation, an incredible collection, and a history of remarkable projects. So we are large enough to do important projects, but small enough to be agile. When the CCA was established as an architecture research center, its focus was not solely on reflecting current architectural conditions but rather on exploring what architecture can and should be. The core mandate is to make architecture a *public concern*.

GC What do you mean by *public concern*?

LB For instance, we have recently expanded on the idea of creating friction, that is, generating questions, through the publication *The Museum Is Not Enough*. To produce concern means you don't pretend to be neutral. It means having an agenda and putting it out there. We always

strive to clarify the purpose behind each project — be it an exhibition, event, or publication — and why we choose specific approaches. This involves meticulous consideration, all the way from conceptualization to the design of each format. It means being a bit intense.

GC Can you expand on your last role at the CCA as curator of the Public Program?

LB In 2016, a new department, *Public*, was created. Before there was a team called *Educational Services*, which was very traditional. It was a team of 10/12 guides and mediators, mainly artists, some designers and urban activists. They were all working part time. Really cool people, with innovative ideas and strong connections, rooted in the city's networks. However, their involvement was limited to conducting tours due to their part-time status. There was also a coordinator responsible for managing their schedules, but there wasn't a distinct curatorial presence among them. It was just a service. Guides were traditionally briefed by the exhibition team towards the end of the process, after which they would devise workshops and work on tours. However, this approach often resulted in them not accurately conveying the exhibition's narrative. The museum really wanted to change the structure of this format and proposed a new way. They aimed to establish a distinct identity for CCA formats, akin to the books, exhibitions, and website. With *Public* they wanted a more immersive involvement in programs rather than just an educational perspective.

I got the job applying for the position at the end of 2016. In my strategy document, instead of having 10 or 12 part-time people, I asked to save the money to have three full-time people and a coordinator. We called them 'Program Assistants' to make an analogy with the curatorial assistants in exhibitions. Instead of just doing tours, they had three responsibilities: organizing workshop events, collaborating with me to research existing programs, and being fully engaged to listen the development of each project. To clarify this last point: I asked them to simply be present in the room, actively listening during all project development meetings, gaining an understanding of how each project took shape. Even if they weren't given specific tasks at that moment, their presence was to absorb how ideas were conceived and formulated. Consequently, after a few months, they could effectively represent the project within the public team. So, when brainstorming ideas for workshops or planning tours, they could suggest relevant contributions based on their insights.

I think it's been successful, but it created one very interesting problem: the profile we require is quite different from what we initially sought. We're not seeking individuals solely interested in guiding, but rather keen on curating exhibitions, conducting research for exhibitions and publications, and capable of integrating into various projects, both in English and French. Finding candidates with this skills is considerably more difficult, especially considering that they are not trained for these roles.

This was sometimes frustrating, sometimes exciting, because it was not an easy process to recruit and hire people who actually could be happy in this role. It was also hard to explain to the institution what it means to have a programme assistant embedded in every project, to invite them to every meeting. In the first year, I was just establishing certain standard formats to create a structure and rhythm.

GC Can you give me some examples of formats you have developed?

LB In *Come and Forget*, participants are invited to devise acts of collective amnesia aimed at benign erasures of ideas, places, or individuals, supported by explanations of how these actions could enhance the world. Typically, they focus on abstract concepts like counterculture or the internet rather than individuals or specific projects. Sometimes they include concepts like the police, which might be more upsetting to power. This format can be seen as the museum's way of acknowledging and atoning for the misconception that its primary role is merely to preserve history through selective editing, exclusion, and deliberate forgetting, rather than actively contributing to its creation. By compelling individuals to publicly justify acts of negation, it prompts them to articulate their beliefs and values more clearly.

Another example, *3-1-1 and a Half*, is an unsubtle demonstration of the idea that we have nothing to teach children and that, rather, things might be the other way around. This format treats them as experts capable of solving urban problems. Its name refers to the non-emergency number used to access local government services in North America. The project works like this: the museum collects urban problems from visitors and then, at each workshop, children and teenagers select from this collection and invent a solution that will be shared with the original problem-haver. For example, you leave a voicemail complaining about icy sidewalks, and a few months later you receive a video message from an unfamiliar child advising you to sprinkle flower and vegetable seeds on the ice so that you get traction now and a garden come springtime. In this way children get to experience being treated as experts, while we help them produce an intelligible response and, in the process, connect two people who would have otherwise never have met.

GC In explaining your way of curating the Public Programme, you expressed the idea that "there is opportunity in being simultaneously understood and misunderstood" (Bratischenko 2022).

LB I think a lot of people are kept out of certain discussions by the very serious tone adopted by museums. Many people, consciously or unconsciously, refuse to take part in specific discussions because of the tone used. I think a lot of discussions are really designed to reproduce

the authority of certain powerful figures and in this way they keep people out. Humour is a way to flatten out a little bit. Trying to involve different audiences, without inhibiting them with the context or with the tones used.

GC What about the *How to* formats?

LB They started as a in-person program in 2018 with *How to: not make an architecture magazine*, since I had a budget to transform the summer residency format. I invited people to the CCA to spend one week together, around 120 hours, the right amount of intensity to force participants to take a position.

GC How many participants each time?

LB Eight, plus two curators.

GC Just to better frame it: the call was open not only to architects but also to any participants, right?

LB Yes, it was open to anyone interested in the topic. Our intention wasn't to conduct exhaustive research that definitively answers all questions about architectural publishing. Instead, we aimed to present perspectives and ideas that felt fresh, previously unexplored, or tailored to specific audiences. The goal was to produce a tool that someone can really use. Such a short time frame helps to make decisions.

While the first one had a clear task, the second one was much harder. It was about curating architectural events, the title was *How to: disturb the public*. Participants included artists, performance artists, and dancers — less institutional figures and more individuals eager to deeply interrogate the institution. In this case, it has been much harder to find a common language, and we had many more questions. Such as: What is disturbance? Who's being disturbed?' In the end we produced a cookbook.

With the pandemic we moved the experience online. The duration of the format extended to three weeks; we didn't meet every day, but we found time slots that work in different time zones. This adjustment alleviated much of the stress and intensity associated with meeting daily; participants had the flexibility to step away, attend to their daily lives, and even take a day off if needed. It was still intense enough to make a decision, but people could also balance their involvement with other commitments. This setup effectively created a dynamic 24-hour environment.

GC How are the results of the CCA projects shared with the public?

LB On the CCA website.

GC Your work seems to be inciting social agitation and questioning crucial societal aspects while maintaining a sense of lightheartedness. This is particularly noteworthy due to the unconven-tional language employed, which may surprise those accustomed to a more traditional museum approach.

LB In my opinion, contemporary institutions are suicidal. I think all these structures, with their roles and responsibilities, just cannot help but be conservative and cannot resist any kind of experimentation, especially the kind that introduces a risk. I think my experience was sort of special: Mirko Zardini was interested in a certain amount of destabilising. At the same time, he wasn't making me an assistant director or a deputy director, so from my position I couldn't cause that much trouble, the risk was manageable. I think it's quite special to have an institution that still has a lot of traditional, respectable functions in a big endowment, but at the same time opens up to a 'troublemaking' position.

Straining the Institutional Culture

In Conversation with Marina Otero Verzier

Marina Otero Verzier is a researcher, educator, and curator. Currently, she is Head of the Social Design master's program at the Design Academy Eindhoven. Previously, she held the position of Director of Global Network Programming at Studio-X, Columbia University GSAPP, in New York. From 2015 to 2022, she was the Director of Research at Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI), the Dutch institute for Architecture, Design, and E-Culture. At HNI she co-founded the *Collecting Otherwise* program and worked on research and exhibition projects, such as *Automated Landscapes*, *Lithium: States of Exhaustion*, and *BURN-OUT: Exhaustion on a planetary scale*. Otero has also co-curated the Shanghai Art Biennial 2021 and was curator of the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018, as well as chief curator of the 2016 Oslo Architecture Triennale.

GC You led the research department at Het Nieuwe Instituut for nearly a decade (2015-2022), spearheading a reimagining of the museum's collection strategy. Your contributions, both in terms of content and format, seem to have played a pivotal role in a larger structural reassessment within the institute regarding its approach to collection management. Could you explain your approach and decisions?

MOV In 2013, I was approached by the director of the museum Guus Beumer to establish a research department following a merger involving three institutions. Despite being based in New York at the time, I found the prospect intriguing, considering the ambiguity surrounding the role of research within museum contexts. While programming was well-defined, the concept of research remained nebulous, presenting an interesting challenge aligned with my academic interests in new models for cultural institutions. Initially, there was no specific budget allocated for research, as the government hadn't prioritized it for the institute, fostering instead the communication of the heritage preserved.

I formed a core team with some members who had already been working there previously, such as Katía Truijen. We were determined to avoid limiting research to instrumental purposes tied to specific exhibitions. Our goal was to foster long-term thinking and iterative processes rather than perpetuating short-term production cycles.

One of our primary objectives was to critically examine the museum's collection, which predominantly featured works by white male architects. Recognizing the need for diversification, we encountered resistance both institutionally and culturally. On one hand, it was a challenge to acknowledge the institutional limitations, while on the other hand, for the archive staff, it meant changing and questioning the way they had worked for the previous twenty years. Initially, we were often accused of following passing trends, whereas the primary goal of an archive is to preserve content for the future.

However, we embarked on pilot projects to challenge existing norms and introduce alternative perspectives. For instance, we curated an exhibition[1] on squatting architecture, *Architecture of Appropriation*, highlighting its significance despite its non-traditional origins. Essentially, we developed a methodology by initially questioning how to integrate squatting architecture into the museum and what implications it carried. This endeavor was not without its challenges, particularly given that squatting was criminalized in the Netherlands in 2010. Thus, we found ourselves in the position of inviting a practice into the museum that was deemed illegal by the government funding the institution. We considered

1 Through exhibitions and the collaborations established during these events, they gathered new materials in the permanent collection

this contradiction as a potentially fruitful tension, one that we consistently discussed with the community involved. Additionally, we grappled with determining the types of documents suitable for inclusion in the museum. This involved negotiating how to preserve the autonomy of the squatting movement while simultaneously integrating it into the official architectural history of the Netherlands without diluting its subversive essence.
This initiative acted as a catalyst for the transformation we sought within the archive and collection, transforming a pilot project into a policy. Setting a precedent, it allowed us to initiate a dialogue with the people working in the archive, especially the director of the archive, Behrang Mousavi, and the archivist, Hetty Berens, who began to support our efforts.
We started reflecting on what had happened and how to adapt this methodology to the mechanisms of the archive. Simultaneously, the museum received millions of euros from the government for the digitization of the archive. I took the opportunity to initiate a discussion on the accessibility of these materials, beyond their mere digitization. The challenge was to understand how to position those materials within the archive and how to position the archive differently. In this way, as a research department, we received some funds to continue and deepen our work for another year. This also allowed us to hire new staff and expand the team, incorporating Setareh Noorani. Her research field was aligned with the interests of the working team, as she had recently curated an exhibition on feminism and architecture.

Building upon the model of the squatting research project, we launched the *Collecting Otherwise* program. We were primarily interested in exploring intersectional themes, like decolonization, colonial thinking, and feminisms in architecture. This is how the project began, and it is still ongoing. While I consider it to have been profoundly radical, at the same time, it was a tiny contribution compared to the rest of the institution. This is a small action compared to the huge apparatus that is the archive, where most of the documents already operate under a certain logic. At times, I've had doubts about my role as someone who legitimizes the institution, even if implementing small, incremental changes with the potential to spark imagination and create fault lines within the infrastructure. Many times they make this crack, but it stays very controlled and small. I questioned my role in legitimizing an institution like Het Nieuwe Instituut, despite the positive changes we initiated. In the larger context, it remains a backward institution, like many others, and I've chosen not to work there or in similar institutions anymore. I think it's important that these institutions are somehow challenged, but these interventions have to hold their subversive potential when they are completely absorbed by the mechanisms of the institution.

Our efforts have initiated transformative discussions and actions, but I remain critical of their overall impact within the larger institutional framework. Despite creating fissures within the system, there's a risk of these interventions being co-opted and diluted by institutional mechanisms. It's essential to maintain the subversive potential of such initiatives amidst broader institutional practices.

GC Do you think that the initiatives you've described contribute, even if in a small way, to shifting the institutional culture? Or do you see them as singular attempts that may not have a lasting impact?

MOV I'm reflecting on whether the impact we make with our efforts is truly significant. There's often a sense of inadequacy, as if our institutional responses only scratch the surface of deeper societal issues. In the early days of the New Instituut, there was a genuine impetus for change, driven by internal motivations rather than external pressures. However, as societal expectations have grown, some institutional responses, not specifically referencing the New Instituut, seem superficial. They may swiftly express support for movements like Black Lives Matter or engage in discussions on race, but substantive change remains elusive. One individual I deeply admire for her transformative approach within her institution is Sofía Hernández from the Kunstinstituut Melly, our neighboring institution. She successfully spearheaded a comprehensive overhaul of the institution's identity and practices. She refused to change the name only, until the institution underwent a comprehensive internal transformation, encompassing interpersonal dynamics, institutional policies, and organizational culture. This process involved extensive training, education, unlearning, and relearning. I'm deeply impressed by their commitment and efforts, as the institution's ethos is palpably different when I engage with it. This level of transformation is something I haven't observed in larger museums.

GC Large museums do address certain issues, but their operational approach often falls short of the ideals they espouse in their communications. Many institutions' discourses seem overly politically correct, ticking all the boxes of what needs to be addressed. Sometimes, it even becomes mundane because of how predictably correct it is. However, the underlying structure remains largely unchallenged. This perpetuation of the same inherited structure makes it difficult to achieve real change... What impact have you observed at Het Nieuwe Instituut as a result of the initiatives launched with the research group? How has the desired transformation impacted the dynamics within the team?

MOV Perhaps there is a difference between some individuals in the team and myself, regarding the age, and a certain degree of radicalism. Being older and more accustomed to living in different places, I could take positions that were more contested. There were several instances during my tenure as Director of Research where I had to inform the Instituut Director that I was pursuing certain initiatives, with

the understanding that if they stirred up trouble in the media or with the government, I would resign. This possibility of resignation was always on the table, for example, when we initiated a fellowship connected to the Caribbean without government consent. It was a fundamental initiative that I, along with the team, believed in, even though it put my job at risk. Similarly, when working with a squatting community, we supported their actions, which were illegal. If we were caught in custody and our association with the National Museum was revealed, it could have led to significant repercussions. Despite the risks, we were deeply engaged in these endeavors. We collaborated with individuals who shared our commitment, even if it meant they ultimately left the institution. There was a sense of purpose in pushing boundaries and challenging the status quo. The director, while questionable in many respects, was open to these kinds of initiatives. However, the sheer size of the institution made large-scale transformation difficult. We recognized that creating para-institutions that could destabilize the main institution was one way to effect change. Personally, I was prepared to lose my job and was even open to the idea of the institution collapsing if necessary. It may sound drastic, but without the belief that the structure could fail, there would always be a tendency to protect it, even in the face of scandals or controversies.
It's essential for institutions to remain relevant to society. If they fail to address societal questions and concerns, then their continuation becomes questionable. Your relevance hinges on your impact on society. If you're not making a difference, there's little reason for your existence. Continuation is meaningful only when you're actively engaging with the pressing questions society faces.

I became disillusioned after many years of working within these systems and eventually decided to transition to working with institutions from the outside. It was a necessary break from the demands of the job, which can be exhausting after seven years. I firmly believe in the importance of institutional renewal. I don't believe in holding a position at an institution for 20 or 30 years. Over such extended periods, you risk losing perspective on things. You need a certain amount of time to realize projects like these, but becoming too comfortable in your role can hinder productivity.

Despite the challenges, I'm immensely proud of what we accomplished during my tenure, as well as the ongoing efforts of Setareh and the team. Setareh's ability to navigate both bureaucratic and radical aspects of the work is admirable, and it's a testament to the passion and expertise of the team as a whole. They have advanced certain notions of how to intervene in archives, and I'm enthusiastic about the impact they continue to make. My concerns extend beyond just the Nieuwe Instituut; they reflect broader questions about the role and function of institutions in society.

GC What has been the reception and impact of these reflections, both from the public, other institutions, and the field of architecture?

MOV In the Netherlands, some of the larger institutions were initially resistant to certain topics. Programs focusing on black feminism and epistemologies were seen as important, but there was a disconnect between offering these programs and the need to transform the institution itself.
For individuals entering the institution, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, the bureaucratic environment could be challenging. Over time, however, there has been a shift towards greater alignment with our initiatives. While there were moments of pushback, the support from many quarters in the Netherlands for our work was evident.
It's true that certain sectors of the Dutch cultural and architectural community were less enthusiastic about our endeavors. We recognized the need for negotiation, especially in a national institution where we had the responsibility of representing diverse perspectives. This balancing act was crucial, particularly when introducing initiatives like *Collecting Otherwise* alongside more conventional collecting practices.

GC I would like to delve deeper into the discussion about tools and methodologies that you touched upon earlier. I noticed that this year, the institute launched a call for Tool Sheds,[2] namely a set of tools that serves both the museum researchers and can be shared or negotiated with the audiences. This seems to be an extension of the collaborative effort you initiated, reflecting on various vocabularies, tools, and methodologies for research, and considering ways to make them more accessible to wider audiences. Could you elaborate on this initiative and its significance?

MOV I have mixed feelings about that. To be honest, I'm less inclined to formalize things in such a manner. I wouldn't have personally initiated an open call for that specific purpose. However, given the lack of a reference point for the task at hand, much of our focus was on methodologies and questioning overarching ideas. For example, when we conducted our first open call for researchers, we explicitly stated that we didn't expect a predetermined outcome. This approach sparked some debate because, traditionally, when you allocate funds to individuals, there's an expectation for them to produce something tangible.

GC That's precisely one of my concerns regarding museums today. There's this constant pressure to demonstrate tangible outcomes resulting from audience engagement activities. However, I believe their relevance should not be solely measured by immediate,

2 https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/articles/call-for-fellows-tool-sheds

quantifiable results. Museums should be capable of initiating meaningful discourse while acknowledging that the outcomes may not be immediately evident or easily quantifiable...

MOV Exactly. So, for me, it was about providing the support and trust that I wished I had as a researcher in my own career. It's about acknowledging that someone may not have a clear outcome in mind but still wants to pursue meaningful work. Even if they don't produce a tangible result in the end and simply use the funding to sustain themselves, that's okay because it allows them to focus on what truly matters. However, creating spaces for long-term, non-instrumentalized research was challenging at first. Many questioned why we would allocate funds without expecting a tangible return. But in the end, everyone produced something remarkable, albeit in different ways and timeframes. To convince skeptics, we emphasized the importance of methodology. Rather than focusing solely on the end product, we placed emphasis on the approach and process. This led to various experiments, particularly in crafting the language of our open calls to attract diverse responses. Now, while I understand the concept of the Tool Sheds, it feels somewhat limiting and practical to me. I would have preferred a more open approach, allowing for flexibility and organic growth rather than prescribing a fixed toolkit. I believe in a continuous negotiation process, more akin to bazaar politics, where ideas are constantly evolving rather than adhering to rigid methodologies.

GC At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned your interest in new models for cultural institutions. Your PhD thesis, *Evanescent Institutions* (2016), delves into the emergence of these new models, particularly highlighting the political implications of temporary and mobile structures. Is this research a part of an ongoing long-term project?

MOV I'm supposed to be working on a book now, but it's never finished. However, I did receive a Graham Foundation grant to work on it. The project initially stemmed from an intuition I had that the idea of institutions, not just cultural museums, but broader societal institutions like family and marriage, was undergoing significant transformation. This intuition was further informed by the economic crisis of 2008-2009 and the movements like the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street, which were calling for a reevaluation of democracy and institutional governance.
I began observing certain initiatives by museums like the Guggenheim and Pompidou, which were creating temporary museums in areas of cities where traditional architectural landmarks couldn't reach. These lightweight, movable museums intrigued me, especially the Guggenheim Lab designed by Atelier Bow-Wow, which I followed closely while in New York. It was located in the East Village and sparked tensions with the local community over gentrification concerns. Despite the controversy, I found the design fascinating — a museum without walls, a public space for participation.

GC It sounds close to what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill wrote in 2000. This idea of the post-museum completely being a set of processes, and no longer connected just with the walls and with the physical building...

MOV Certainly. These initiatives were quite radical in some aspects but also posed significant challenges. Take for instance the collaboration between BMW and the Guggenheim, which seemed to embody mobility and the dream of architectural movement prevalent in the 60s and 70s. However, it also revealed the underlying economic and geopolitical forces at play. The museum without walls was not just about breaking physical barriers; it was entangled with financialization and real estate operations. My research delved into understanding how institutional spaces are formed amidst these dynamics, despite the apparent disappearance of traditional museum walls.
I observed similar tensions in other projects, like the Pompidou Mobile and the Serpentine Galleries' pavilions. While these structures represented mobility and accessibility, they were also accompanied by layers of security and infrastructure, underscoring the complexities of power within seemingly ephemeral architectures.
My doctoral thesis examined the relationship between political ideologies, architecture, and the temporality of these structures. It was a fascinating exploration of how these temporary interventions interacted with their environments, leaving lasting impacts even after their physical departure. Interestingly, after completing my thesis, I found myself working within institutions that embraced similar temporary pavilions or biennials.[3] It was a unique opportunity to confront the theoretical arguments I had formulated with the practical realities of institutional work. Despite encountering challenges and contradictions along the way, this journey has been immensely productive, constantly pushing me to reassess and critique the intersection of theory and practice within institutional contexts.

3 The Het Nieuwe Instituut is tasked with curating the Dutch Pavilion representing The Netherlands at the Venice Biennale di Architettura.

Tool Sheds to Collect Otherwise

In Conversation with Setareh Noorani

Setareh Noorani's current research at the Nieuwe Instituut (Rotterdam, NL) focuses on the qualitative, paradigm-shifting notions of decoloniality, feminisms, queer ecologies, non-institutional representations, and the implications of the collective, more-than-human body in architecture, its heritage and ambiguous future scenarios – for instance as part of the projects *Collecting Otherwise, Appropriation as Collective Resistance, Feminist Design Strategies*, and *Modernisms Along the Indian Ocean*. Setareh Noorani received for this work the Museum Talent Prize 2021, awarded by the Dutch Ministry of Culture and Science and, most recently, the Mondriaan Fund.

GC How did the project Collecting Otherwise come about and how is the working group structured?

SN I conceived the project together with Marina Otero Verzier, who at the time was Director of Research at Het Nieuwe Instituut (2015–2022). She asked me to contribute to the Research Department once I had finished my architectural studies in Delft. We created an intersectional working group to question the archival gaze using a work-in-progress method. The project is part of the larger *Rethinking the Collection* initiative, under the auspices of *Disclosing Architecture*.

The idea was to develop a tool shed structure, a set of methodological tools used to work in our research but also available to others. We started thinking differently about acquisition, collection and archiving in general. We ask questions such as: why do we have these particular structures? How can we intervene? How can we make it more multifocal? How can we add international perspectives? We often research materials from books, images, notes, documents, people's memories. Often we start from conversations, people just remember a name, and then we try to trace them. It's a bit like detective work. But the way of working is very heterogeneous.

To give you an example: we established the importance of having more women in the collection. We created a workshop called *What Would a Non-Sexist City Be like?* This has been our first big case study. We considered acquiring Vrouwen Bouwen Wonen as a collective, marking the first instance of Het Nieuwe Instituut acquiring a collective entity, which primarily operated as a network. It's a foundation and network that we are in the process of collecting; we have been in contact with many of the previous members of this network, allowing us to tailor the acquisition process more closely to their individual contributions. This approach is much more holistic than simply acquiring everything under the foundation and then retrospectively determining its significance. We now have the opportunity to engage more closely with these women, to understand firsthand how they wish for their stories to be collected, experienced, and shared.

GC It sounds really like a negotiation process. It's not just working retrospectively on materials, but it's an attempt to involve communities in the production of archives. Is it an ongoing process?

SN Exactly. Three years have passed, and in the working group there are not only the people working at the Nieuwe Instituut but others we asked to be part of the core group. Together we form the working group that is more or less the mother cell, but there are different project groups. For instance, we set up a series of workshops for Indonesian architects, artists, researchers to get to know our collection and also to intervene with speculative projects. They are all different ways to

make a collection more accessible on an horizontal platform. It's a bilateral process in which we both find new meanings and valuations for the collection that we have in the Netherlands, which contains so much information about Indonesia as a country that was formerly colonised. It was really interesting. I think major contributions are not only the projects that we will make accessible on our own platforms but also the way they researched the case studies to gather additional knowledge that will be made accessible together with the collection items. There is actually such a need for access and some of these archives haven't been properly digitised yet. That's another question that we're going to pose to the Instituut. By doing these hands-on projects, we also come across certain gaps. Both in knowledge and in accessibility. It's never possible to completely fill an entire gap. I think it's both about making certain bridges over these gaps and shifting perspective to actually see that there's not a gap at all. It's just something that we should perceive differently or have other ways, other tools, other particular methodologies to deal with an absence.

GC How do you collect these contributions and what methodologies do you pursue?

SN Currently, we are thinking through *queering* as a verb or having a decolonial look at the collection items. These are typical archival theory tools that we are trying to use. Together we also came up with a couple of strategies that we defined as a Tool Shed on the testing ground. These tools are, for instance, the Archival Care Rider, the Asterisk, the Lysergic Secretary, the Archival Community.

GC So, it's really like redefining a vocabulary.

SN Yes, exactly. Custodianship, post-custodianship, reading against the grain, but also thinking through online platforms to make certain archives accessible. Similar to incorporating ideas generated within our working group or utilizing tools borrowed from our neighbors. We bring it all together in the tool shed. Instead of a shed that is being locked, we leave the doors open, the threshold is low. You can also think of it as having a ramp as well for people who have difficulty walking or a particular movement disability. Then we work together on the case studies in the tool shed and people can bring in but also take out what they want. Instead of ending the project in about a year with a particular tool kit, we want to end with a tool shed. It becomes this adaptable process of people coming in, people going out, bringing their case studies, working on their own case studies and gathering knowledge together. They can take out of it what they want. It's also easily re-conceivable for every sub-project, without the need to start from scratches every time.

GC In terms of accessibility, are you addressing a specific community or is it open to everyone? And how is the audience reacting to this project of collecting? How do you make clear how you are changing things or trying to make an attempt in this direction?

SN I think often a lot of work within academia is focused on the finished result, but we really try to build up a network and then, through various media, show what we are doing continuously. For example, we communicate through newsletters and updating the website.

GC Is the newsletter from the Nieuwe Instituut?

SN We have our own newsletter. It is much more flexible and less institutional. Currently, we reach about 200 email addresses of very dedicated people who often reply. With Carolina Pinto — graphic designer and a member of our working group — we also created a zine. We distribute the copies by hand and on Instagram. We post it for free because we're managing institutional money. It's for us a way to create proximity to our network and to make our knowledge and process more accessible. We have organised a lot of events inside and outside the Netherlands, at conferences or public gatherings at the Instituut. All have a certain degree of hybridity and being accessible: we make reports and you can read them afterwards, even if you are not able to be there in presence. Sometimes we also record them, if there's the consent of the speakers.

With the working group we also have monthly gatherings that have already been running for three years. We have a space where we come together and share updates on the sub-projects, either doing additional research into the case studies, or diving deeper into a particular tool, or organising a small intervention or exhibition. For example, we organised some walks, and Yasmin Tri Aryani is currently thinking of organising walks in Indonesia, using maps she made containing buildings found in the archive from the collection of the Nieuwe Instituut. These walks are organised with a bamboo forest guide. There are local architecture associations aimed for students but also for people who would like to see architecture and know more about it.

As another example, at the moment we are working with the Trojan Horse Cell. They are Czar Kristoff, Isola Tong, Clara Balaguer and Alfred Marasigan. They all have Filipino heritage. Isola is currently in the United States, Clara is in the Netherlands, Sara and Alfred are in Manila in the Philippines, but together they are the Trojan Horse Cell. They have brought a very important perspective into our working group, the perspective of Southeast Asian artists. Still, in traditional research projects, the framework is a Eurocentric framework of archiving. You need to store it, and you need to keep it in the best way possible. But the 'best way possible' is so illogical from the perspective of a lot of different contexts and cultures, not only in the framework of what is able to be kept but also the particular funding structures, the work that's being assigned to preservation or restitution. Clara introduced me to the beautiful concept

of 'cultural remittance."[1] We started to think about what it means to have institutional remittance to really make sure that we co-organise projects on archiving collections and preservation on equal terms with people outside of the European context.

GC And how is it working?

SN It's proliferating. Sometimes it is a challenge to squeeze everything under one single umbrella. People do their own project, but it's captured underneath Collecting Otherwise. We see ourselves almost as a program in its own right. If you were to sketch this diagram, you'd have the Research Department, followed by the Collections Department, Disclosing Architecture, and finally our working group. Together, we examine foundational case studies through specific lenses, which then lead to the development of tools housed within the so-called Tool Shed. Additionally, one could argue that the concept of the Tool Shed also influences these particular departments, groups of people, or modes of operation, as that's where we currently stand.

GC Everything sounds really international, but then you spread the outcomes locally. Do digital forms have a role in this project?

SN We try to connect hybrid collaborations internationally and then from there we organise hyper local events that have an impact. Sometimes it's a challenge to work for an institution, because it has so many things going on that on many occasions it is better to have your own communication channel and partners. The Instituut cannot communicate everything that we are doing all the time, especially if it's so much. Some of the things we are doing, you can only view from social pages of other partners.

GC Are you completely independent in how you proceed and in how you create your collaborations?

SN I would say yes. The deal that we made with directors and other colleagues at the Nieuwe Instituut is that we are transparent in the way we work and at the end of the project, the results are disseminated back into the institution. These are our foundations, this was the aim of the project. I think it's working very well; a lot of people know what we are doing. Of course not everything was easy, but a lot changed in the last three years. It takes some persistence, a lot of work, and a lot of patience to make people understand that this was the way to go in order to achieve

1 Cultural remittance refers to the process by which immigrants or diaspora communities transmit cultural practices, ideas, values, and social norms from their country of origin to their country of residence.

a long lasting impact. We had to explain to people what we wanted to do over and over again, because not everybody understands it. I think also some events that happened in the international community helped, like the attention given to Documenta 15, which had a similar way of working.

GC What you are saying resonates very much with the ongoing transformations within museums and the ongoing discussions after the ICOM General Assembly in Tokyo in 2019...

SN Actually, I was there. Not everybody wanted to implement the definition at that time. There was a revision in 2022. We were there at the voting. I went there with my colleague Carolina to present a paper on the project Collecting Otherwise. It was a great experience, but we noticed that we were among the youngest attendees. This highlights an issue within ICOM: while there is diversity in terms of backgrounds due to its global network, there is a lack of diversity in terms of age, sexual preferences, and gender identities.

I also have the feeling that a lot of countries represented have a relatively young history of joining ICOM. Some of them are just starting up their institutions and museums. I could see that with, for instance, a museum in Egypt or an institution from Morocco, they either come from a grassroots perspective into a movement of institutionalisation or a top down government that is newly reforming and institutionalising. That's why I think that we should be careful with the particular examples we set as common for everyone. These newly institutionalising nations, and the particular organisations that they represent, may not always comply with the traditions of western museums. We should pay attention to those suggesting that we need to consider restitution more thoughtfully, taking into account all aspects of each situation and the necessary pace of action. We need to be proactive and welcoming to those gestures.

Engaging Audiences

In Conversation with Flora van Gaalen

Flora van Gaalen is Head of Programme at Het Nieuwe Instituut. Previously she held positions as Project Manager and Curator at Het Nieuwe Instituut, Premsela (the Netherlands Institute for Design and Fashion), and ARCAM (Amsterdam Centre for Architecture).

GC As the Head of Programme at HNI, could you elaborate on the responsibilities associated with your role and provide insight into the areas of focus for your department?

FVG The Nieuwe Instituut is a rather unique institution. We are publicly funded and our mission is to promote culture and knowledge in the fields of architecture, design, and digital culture. A significant part of the work of my department is dedicated to supporting various tasks within these different fields. One of the main focuses is on internationalization, which involves representing Dutch architects, designers, and digital makers abroad, as well as organizing programs for professionals in those fields.

As the head of this department, my role primarily involves collaborating with a team of programmers, producers, and hospitality staff on exhibitions, public events, and our educational program in Rotterdam. Our target audience includes not only dedicated professionals but also a broader cultural audience. We aim to cater to both groups, recognizing that professionals in different disciplines, such as digital makers and architects, may have varying levels of expertise in each other's fields.

Essentially, we function as both a museum and an institute, serving diverse audiences and maintaining an archive of architecture. Additionally, we advocate for the preservation of design and digital archives in the Netherlands, as there is currently no dedicated funding structure for this purpose. We lobby for funding to ensure that this valuable heritage is not lost.

GC Have you established collaborations with other institutions for the moment to preserve these materials?

FVG Yes, we have established several partnerships. We have identified around thirty important designers and archives that are at risk of being lost. Various parties are capable of preserving these archives, but funding is needed to support the existing infrastructure. The Network for Archives of Design and Digital Culture (NAD), which also has a dedicated page on our website, is an initial result of this effort. The government tasked us with a coordinating role in building this network, which we've been doing for the past three years and will continue to do so. Moving forward, our focus will be more on actively preserving archives. While previously, we were more focused on narrative elements, research, and public discussions, we are now shifting towards action-oriented approaches. Our aim is to ensure that a significant number of archives are preserved in the coming years and that these important practices are not forgotten and remain accessible for research and future generations.

GC In 2018, the museum hosted the exhibition and research project *Speculative Design Archive*,

which precisely addressed this topic and engaged the audiences to negotiate possible solutions together... It seems the initiative arose from concerns regarding the dispersed management of design and digital culture archives across the country. The museum chose to address this issue by making it a matter of public interest, sharing a temporary archive in the form of an exhibition within its galleries. I'm curious to know if this project has led to any subsequent actions or strategies by the museum, building upon the contributions gathered from the public and the resulting discussions.

FVG Part of our effort is to raise awareness among designers about the significance of preserving their work. While we've observed that engaging the general public with this topic has proven challenging – the broader audience often finds the exhibitions dense and somewhat highbrow,– we've undertaken other projects that garnered more public engagement. While architecture and design may feel more distant, fashion is a topic easily relatable to people.

In 2015, for almost a year, we transformed the entire building into a *Temporary Fashion Museum*, adopting the exhibition model of a department store. Upon entering, visitors were greeted by the perfume section, where we featured a special fragrance inspired by the museum park. Visitors were encouraged to sample it. Then, their coats would be taken by the wardrobe attendants, who would select garments to display on mannequins in the window, turning visitors into part of the exhibition. Inside the gallery, we showcased a vast couture archive from a Swiss collector. Her extensive collection, stored in boxes, was curated with the help of volunteers who interacted with visitors, often learning from them. These volunteers, with their expertise in various techniques, would engage in conversations and workshops on fashion. Additionally, we had a shop on the second floor where visitors could purchase items.
Our *New Haberdashery* project, which ran for several years, offered workshops led by local designers and skilled community members, allowing visitors to create their own clothes. This initiative was supported by the community and eventually continued independently. However, like many projects, it became challenging to sustain over time.

GC Your practice reflects a clear commitment to actively interact with diverse audience groups. These encompass individuals closely affiliated with the museum's research domains, as well as a broader audience with a general interest but lacking specific training in architecture, fashion, or design. How do you foster and cultivate a connection with these diverse audiences?

FVG For example the *Gallery 3 By You* initiative makes exhibition space available for various different projects, serving as a platform for professionals from various fields. It represents a win-win situation: we receive requests almost every week from people interested in curating exhibitions. Many of them already have funding secured, and they're mainly looking for a space and communication support. *Gallery 3* serves this purpose perfectly.

We have an open call once a year where we select five talents, not necessarily young ones, but individuals with their own practice looking to explore something new. We provide them with a small amount for their work, and they cover the out-of-pocket costs for technical support and equipment usage. This setup allows them to program the space according to their vision. It's been quite successful as it brings in a crowd that may not otherwise visit the institute, serving as ambassadors in their own right.

We have also initiated a collaboration with a local design agency called Concrete Blossom. It's a growing collective of young creatives, many of whom are in their 20s. They don't necessarily have formal design training but are street-smart, and most come from migrant backgrounds. Given Rotterdam's diverse cultural landscape and the neglect they feel from the predominantly right-wing government, these creative individuals have organized themselves to demand more access and opportunities. When they reached out to us, we saw an opportunity for a meaningful collaboration. We've been working together for several years now, carefully balancing our support without overshadowing their autonomy. We channel some of our funding and network to these groups that might not have easy access to institutions like ours. One of the programs under this collaboration is called *YouthDEM*, involving ten youngsters aged 18 to 25, who are mentored by members of the Concrete Blossom community and us. They brainstorm and execute their own projects, such as designing the school of the future or proposing alternatives to controversial urban development plans. While this program isn't highly visible within the Instituut, we're working on making it more prominent while respecting the delicate balance of our partnership.

GC That is something that resonates with my experience. We had similar concerns with the Art Club project at Museion, in Bolzano. How can we avoid simply cannibalizing existing projects, taking into account the power imbalance of the museum in these relationships? While these institutional initiatives generously offer a funded and visible platform, it's important to recognize that these other realities already exist, even if they may not have the same visibility. Therefore, when engaging with stakeholders in the area, it was vital for us to ensure that collaboration was mutually beneficial. It needed to be an exchange situation, where both sides gained something valuable from the collaboration.

FVG We're also discussing how to co-create with our audiences, but it's still somewhat uncertain because our core audience tends to be more professional. So, while there are excellent examples of museums collaborating closely with specific local communities to create exhibitions on topics that resonate with them, we still have to figure out how to fully adopt that perspective rather than relying solely on the expertise of architects. It's an ongoing conversation.

GC Perhaps that's precisely the point: to engage and cultivate specific communities of practice around the museum, which can then serve as antennas and connectors for a broader audience attracted to aspects and perspectives different from those the museum could present alone...

Based on my experience at Museion, we were not asked to interfere with traditional mandates like the collection or exhibitions, while the public program could be negotiated to some extent. It serves as an entry point where the public can contribute more readily, perhaps because the required expertise can be openly discussed.

FVG Yes, that is true.

GC At the beginning of our discussion, you mentioned an official mandate from the Dutch State to the Nieuwe Instituut, which serves as the museum's founder. I'm interested in the nature of this relationship and its implications. Does this mandate result in any pressure regarding content and methodological choices? And does this relationship generate a productive tension, making the museum a platform for speculative inquiry into societal happenings?

FVG Our inception a decade ago stemmed from budget cuts, as a consequence of a political shift to the right. The decision to merge three separate institutes into one was driven by the narrative of fostering the emerging creative industries.

A couple of years ago we were also asked to focus on the economic aspect of the design practice and acknowledge its economic value. To look at the success of design as a significant contributor to the economy, alongside the narrative of solutionism, particularly technical solutionism where designers are seen as the ultimate problem-solvers. This narrative was opposed by our founding director, Guus Beumer, who was well-informed about policy and lobbying efforts. He emphasized the immense value of creativity in art and design, especially considering the high density of art academies in the Netherlands. An emphasis

on the economization of the discipline and its consequences on the sustainability of the practice for designers, guided our hidden agenda. It was not just to showcase successful designers but also to challenge the design, architecture, and digital fields to critically examine policies and cultural spaces.

With our new director, Eric Chen, we're encouraged to move beyond inward-focused activities and concentrate more on action and collaboration. For example, along with four other institutions in the Netherlands, we introduced into our organization model the concept of *Zoöp*.[1] This choice includes representation for nonhumans in decision-making processes, highlighting our commitment to regenerative goals and non-human-centered perspectives. We aim to make these initiatives public to encourage broader engagement and discussion.

GC How does this translate specifically into your work and what impact does it have on decision-making processes?

FVG Essentially, we've introduced a new role called the *Speaker for the Living*, who represents non-human voices within our board of directors. This person, a landscape architect, was hired for a three-year term to bring these perspectives into our decision-making processes.

This initiative is part of a broader movement involving similar roles in other organizations across the Netherlands, facilitated by the Zoönomics Institute. It reflects a growing awareness of the importance of considering non-human entities in our actions and decisions.

GC These processes surely introduce a new dimension that challenges the conventional framework of the museum. However, I find myself torn, because the traditional structure often acts as a barrier to these transformative processes, highlighting the inherent orthodoxy within the institution.
At Het Nieuwe Instituut, how flexible and open are you to stretching and reimagining what the museum can be?

FVG You're absolutely right. Especially with initiatives like *YouthDEM*, they have the potential to transform us much more than we currently allow. I believe this is largely due to our identity as an exhibition-focused institution. We have quite a large building with four exhibition spaces, including one very large one. Despite receiving substantial funding from the government, it often feels insufficient for the space we have. Our ambition to attract more visitors is high, but if we had fewer exhibition

1 "Zoöp is the title of an organisational model for cooperation between human and nonhuman life that safeguards the interests of all zoë (Greek for 'life'). The zoöp model makes the interests of nonhuman life part of organisational decision making." Available at: https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/projects/zoop

spaces, we could potentially be more flexible in our approach. However, the rigid deadlines and structures associated with exhibition-making can sometimes hinder our ability to cater to a broader audience.

We're now learning, under the leadership of Eric Chen, to strike a balance. While we aim to operate more like a traditional museum in some respects, we also want to maintain space for experimentation and innovation, particularly within our research team and other programs. Our organizational structure is somewhat unconventional for a museum; for example, we don't have curators on staff. Instead, we prioritize research. Despite these challenges, we're constantly evolving, although it's often more about how we approach things rather than what's written on paper. Indeed, there's room for us to be more flexible, but we also need to meet our deadlines.

GC I can see that museums are often hesitant to fully open up, since they cannot be sure of what might result from these interactions or exchanges...

FVG True. It seems that many museums, if not all, are rooted in their collections, which serve as their core identity. Even when they seek to explore other avenues, the collection remains crucial.
At the Nieuwe Instituut, we have a research archive focused solely on architecture, which grants us some flexibility. We can delve into exhibitions on diverse topics, but it does require collaboration and mediation to translate research into engaging exhibitions, especially for a wider audience. We find ourselves in a middle ground, lacking the vast collections of some museums yet not entirely reliant on blockbuster exhibitions. Sometimes, I find myself envying those with extensive collections, as they have a wealth of material to draw from.

GC On the other hand, as an institution, you're striving to go beyond the creation of purely academic knowledge, fostering a different kind of interaction with local communities and diverse audiences. I believe it's a privilege to have the freedom to set a different tone of voice to address urgent and complex issues, thus promoting a sense of accessibility and mutual understanding..

FVG It's true, but I think it's a unique skill set, and we don't possess the magic formula for it. Artists excel in this regard because their work often communicates on its own. Our research team is highly knowledgeable and articulate, but sometimes they speak a language that's hard to translate for a broader audience. Fashion, on the other hand, is inherently more accessible and inviting, making it easier to engage a wider range of people compared to design or architecture. Digital topics also resonate well with diverse audiences, but it's uncertain if that's the direction we want to pursue. What if we engage in more co-creation with the audience? Perhaps that's the key to delve deeper into and to further involve the public in architecture topics, for instance. It could be a long-term process to explore.

Radical Hospitality

In Conversation with Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung is an art curator and author. Since 2023, he has been the director at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin. He was then artistic director at S A V V Y Contemporary in Berlin from 2009 to 2022, which he also founded. Ndikung was also the curator-at-large for Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel in 2017; a guest curator of the Dak'Art biennale in Dakar, Senegal in 2018; as well as artistic director of the 12th Bamako Encounters in 2019. In the same year, he curated the Finland Pavilion at the Venice Biennale together with the Miracle Workers Collective.

GC Your curatorial practice is based on the idea of a radical hospitality. You aim at "creating an institution for the people" (Ballantyne-Way 2023), "spaces that care for everyone and their stories" (Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Peterson 2021). In this moment of crisis for museums, I'm interested in the meaning and in the challenges you might face. How do you practically create and allow these spaces for a democratic exchange and how do you deal with the friction that these encounters between the institution and the public inevitably generate?

BSBN Institutions are in crisis because they want to become sterile, to disinfect themselves. They have a distorted idea of purity and stage a position of wealth. Both the exhibition and the institution are public spaces, but both neglect some of their public aspects. My work aims to bring life into the institution. What I am interested in exploring is how to invite inside the institution what is outside and how to communicate outside what is inside.

GC You spoke of spaces of dissonance (Soh Bejeng Ndikung 2018). It is an attitude that you wish both for the art and for the institutions, an asynchronicity that allows for friction. How do you avoid and refuse canonical conventions?

BSBN I have no solutions to offer, we are still working on it. At Haus der Kulturen der Welt we conceive the museum as a laboratory, we work in the process. In domesticated spaces people normally try to eliminate dissonance, to polish the hard edges. What we propose instead is to deal with friction in a productive way. How can these artistic spaces become something where dissonances are transformed into something conducive?

GC At S A V V Y Contemporary, the center's practice led to the decision to establish a dedicated design department to investigate and define the discipline's mandate. The museum's practice itself questioned the role and methodologies in use. The design department arose as an inevitable response to the ongoing research into the colonial tradition of Western institutions. The very methods by which information was communicated came under scrutiny.

BSBN It is all about design. It is not about the content but about its container. Different containers bring different contexts. It depends on how things are presented. I'm interested in critical forms

and that's where design comes in. The institution has to think about the disposition of its contents.

GC How do you concretely establish a dialogue with your audience? The traditional structure of a museum is based on inherited hierarchical structures that do not allow the public to enter or negotiate meanings.

BSBN This is the Western concept of the museum. But every culture has its own concept of a museum. Other cultures have museums that are not object-based.

If you think, for instance, about the carnival period. It could be considered an example of what an ephemeral museum could be. It comes every year, with drums, instruments, clothes worn by people, and then it disappears. This is what happens in other parts of the world if we talk about a museum. The museum is rather a performative practice: the body is part of the museum; the object is not detached but has to be worn. In Western museums, objects are instead canonized and frozen, but in my opinion these institutions should be more porous, performative, interactive, and accessible.

GC Do you think that the experience you are developing at HKW is something unique? How can others participate in these transformation processes without exoticising practices that do not belong to the Western tradition?

BSBN I'm not concerned by that. I'm interested in an institution that has the possibility to cultivate and disseminate different kinds of knowledge. Invite and find spaces for different kinds of people to enter in the museum, to not be afraid by certain kinds of structure. I'm interested in creating such critical spaces.

GC How do you negotiate the contents and the programs with different audiences?

BSBN I try to exercise a deep listening practice to understand who the audience is and what they want. At HKW we have, for example, a format called *Exercises*, to invite different public to discuss and give inputs.

GC Does the idea of interdisciplinarity play a role in these processes? You suggest *pidginization* as curatorial method (Bonaventure 2023), collapsing the boundaries of disciplines.

BSBN If we go out in the world, people are simultaneously reading, dancing, sleeping, jogging, working, and so on. They are all doing different kinds of things. They all exist in one particular space. The challenge is about finding spaces of negotiation.

GC Your curatorial practice is characterized by processes of reparation, reconciliation, restitution. What role do exhibitions play in this? Are they tools to activate discourses?

BSBN Certainly they are tools of communication. That's what they do and they have always done. They are catalysts, triggers, activators. They have agency. They are not silent, quiet, inactive instruments.

GC What has changed in the transition from S A V V Y Contemporary to HKW?

BSBN There has been a change in scale, in the interests — both mine, of the public, and of the institution – in the expectations. We brought with us the idea of a radical hospitality but must take a different shape, a different space.

Interrogating Design

In Conversation with Elsa Westreicher

Elsa Westreicher has been an active part of S A V V Y Contemporary: The Laboratory of Form-Ideas between 2014 and 2020. There she initiated the design department and curated the project *Spinning Triangles: Ignition of a School of Design* (2019). Her practice aims to understand communicative conventions and visual languages, to challenge and disrupt reading patterns, like those influenced by colonial logic. She graduated from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London and holds a Master's degree in Liberal Studies at The New School for Social Research in New York.

GC Could you begin by introducing yourself and your role at S A V V Y? I'm particularly interested in the background and approach of the design department, of which you are the founder.

EW I have a background in design and completed a Master's in Liberal Studies. During my time studying in New York, I met Saskia Köbschall, who was already working for S A V V Y, and she suggested that I join the team as a graphic designer. I then moved to Berlin in 2014 and worked with them for the following six years. There was a connection and affinity for me, not only thematically, with S A V V Y's activities. I was born in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, and this collaboration allowed me to focus on and recognize deep structures within Western society regarding themes like colonialism and racism. Through its practice, S A V V Y works to reconfigure these power relations in the present.

I began to reflect on these themes in connection with design. The origins of the discipline are always linked to industrialization, but I believe there is not enough problematization regarding these processes. It's a story always told from a Euro-American-centric perspective. It always starts from a functional perspective but lacks an overview of the social, economic, and political conditions that enabled its development and laid the foundations of the discipline. Additionally, I perceived a lack of a decolonial perspective on phenomena and their impacts on Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

This led to the creation of the design department. Establishing a similar space arises from the need to decode and recode visual systems and their biases in order to uncover design stories, practices, and philosophies beyond the Euro-American canon. In addition to communicating the center's mission, the department is dedicated to creating dialogue formats and providing a public platform for discourse on design, to understand and share its inherited power structures, and also exploring resistance strategies. To achieve these research goals, S A V V Y Contemporary has opened collaboration to researchers and designers interested in working on these topics.

GC Could you give me an example of an activity that arose from this inquiry?

EW For the centenary of the Bauhaus, *Spinning Triangles: Ignition of a School of Design* was a long-term project with four different events throughout 2019. With a diverse and multitasking team, we sought to challenge and act against the intrinsic neo-colonial power structures in design practices, theories, and teachings, by moving the project across three countries: Germany (Dessau and Berlin), Democratic Republic of Congo (Kinshasa), and China (Hong Kong).

The project kicked off in Dessau, where Van Bo Le-Mentzel unveiled a new Tinyhouse, the Wohnmaschine: a miniature clone of the

Bauhaus Dessau building's workshop wing. S A V V Y Contemporary inhabited this space, inviting numerous guests to challenge the complex legacy of modernity. During these encounters, we aimed to address critical points in the relationship between colonialism and design, exploring its various dimensions of visibility and invisibility. Recognizing the power of design, which shapes our environments, interactions, and existence, we aimed to shed light on the long-overlooked or appropriated narratives and practices of the Global South. This necessitated new forms of learning and unlearning, often ancient but long ignored. Through a series of workshops and a four-day symposium, participants debated current states, questioned solutions, discussed successes, failures, ideas, possibilities, and impossibilities, moving between presentations, walks, discussions, music, and performances. Several workshops initiated further dialogues, where social and political climates, present conditions, everyday creation, as well as existing educational formats, were not only conceived but also enacted through practice.

Roundtable discussions critically examined the concept of a design school, creating a speculative framework where certain hypotheses were clear: such a school would not be temporary but enduring and lived. The aim was to create spaces for epistemological diversity and articulate knowledges as a means of decolonizing the singularity of knowledge. The project's second iteration took place through a symposium and workshops in Kinshasa. Various actors from former colonies gathered to address how we can conceive our everyday environments in a world where too many still-active modernist projects have failed, to enable a collective future – and through which philosophies. From this, and through roundtable discussions, we imagined a concept for a design school to be explored in other geographies.

These discussions led to the third appointment, a four-week summer school in Berlin. Though an open call, we activated a *non-school*, engaging forty participants and five guests from Kinshasa, seeking to unravel the profound interplay between modernity and colonialism and challenge their repercussions in our world-building. Each week featured public lectures, or in its broader sense *contributions*, from thinkers, artists, and practicing designers such as Arjun Appadurai, Olani Ewunnet, Henri Kalama, Kristina Leko, Dominique Malaquais, or Lorenzo Sandoval. Through processes of thought and creation, forms of cohabitation and co-creation were negotiated and advanced, leading to various commitments, with open public days at the end of the process.

The fourth and final phase of the project took place in Hong Kong, in collaboration with the Para Site art space. Rather than pretending to reach conclusions, we recognize that this inversion was another opening to the themes at play in the Spinning Triangles, with further spirals and transformations in the future.

The *Bauhaus Van* was somewhat the initial catalyst for everything. It became a sort of social media and local newspaper phenomenon; many people wanted to see it. It became an attraction in itself, not necessarily

primarily about the discussions we were engaging in. This led many people to attend who otherwise wouldn't have come if it had just been a *XYZ* project.

GC What kind of dialogue was there between the design department and S A V V Y as an institution?

EW The department emerged as a natural outcome of ongoing projects and discussions, stemming from a collective and non-hierarchical effort among participants in the organization's meetings. Many team members, such as artistic director Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung or communications manager Anna Jäger, were already attuned to the political implications of design. Anna was indeed the primary collaborator I engaged with extensively. She was the person responsible for the communication department, overseeing a wide array of tasks including social media management, newsletter creation, and various other responsibilities. Additionally, she served as a translator and editor, contributing to tasks such as subtitle creation. Anna has been involved since the inception and has played a pivotal role in various aspects of our work in the design department.

In 2015 the identity redesign served as catalysts for these reflections. Designing a logo necessitates delving into the fundamentals, as it requires highlighting the essentials of the institution and, therefore, also considering how design positions itself in relation to these issues.

We discussed different proposals for the new logo. The objective was for it to mirror what S A V V Y stands for: Given S A V V Y's emphasis on critical reflections regarding the use of language and writing, the visual identity predominantly features written text, creating simultaneously openings for interpretation through confrontation and direct disruption. The writing system was designed to provoke discord in the reader, prompting them to stumble and question, thus fostering a moment of potential reconfiguration amidst this brief confusion. Ultimately, the solution was quite simple: employing spacing. By inserting spaces between specific words and adjusting letter spacing, we aimed to challenge and potentially deconstruct words central to certain concepts in a decolonial manner, thereby creating room for exploration between these words and texts.

We tried to introduce a performative perspective to design. In terms of the usual reading flow, we created this interruption, which is applied to all those words that S A V V Y questions or that need to be distinguished: This means that 'word' becomes 'W O R D,' the word 'world' becomes 'W O R L D,' and so on.

GC Has your approach to design transformed through your involvement in a long-term collaboration as opposed to project-specific works? Do you believe this approach is viable in the long run? It entails more

than just providing a service; it involves long-term engagement in the processes. While it's undoubtedly a more intricate approach and challenging to sustain financially, I'm interested in whether, from both an operational and human perspective, it yields different outcomes.

EW Certainly, the type of relationship established is different, as is the long-term perspective you gain on the processes in which you operate. There's also an element of vulnerability involved, as the relationship formed with the people within the organization extends beyond that of an external service provider.

The financial aspect poses a challenge in these processes. During my time at S A V V Y, I worked as a freelancer, and depending on the complexity of ongoing projects, I had to supplement with other full-time or part-time jobs outside. There wasn't a fixed salary; rather, funding came based on project needs and was distributed accordingly. Initially, the cultural space wasn't as internationally recognized and didn't have the same financial resources it does now. The institution in its early days was different from what it is presently, we all worked as freelancers or volunteers. We were essentially members of an association.

GC How many people have been/are part of S A V V Y?

EW The number varies a lot, but I would say roughly around twenty people, probably. The number varied depending on the ongoing projects, which determined the allocation of funding among the staff. Efforts were made over time to formalize the structure, ensuring that the staff involved could count on more consistent income streams.

GC You left S A V V Y in 2020: Did the pandemic influence your decision?

EW No, the two phenomena are not related. When I left, the pandemic had not yet begun; I had already decided to leave in 2019, wanting to move back to Kinshasa, but then there were some projects we needed to finish. It didn't seem right to me to maintain my position without actively participating in S A V V Y's activities.

The Museum as an Editorial Device

In Conversation with Luca Lo Pinto

Luca Lo Pinto is an art historian, curator, and editor. He worked as an independent curator for many years and from 2014 to 2019 at the Kunsthalle in Wien. In 2004, he co-founded NERO Editions, an international publishing house devoted to art, criticism, and contemporary culture. Since 2020 he has been the artistic director of MACRO, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome. His approach questions the structure and the formats of the museum itself in its relationship with the public.

GC You began your term as artistic director of the MACRO around one year ago: what context have you been confronted with?

LLP The MACRO is barely twenty years old, opened in 2002, and has a troubled history. Ten years ago, the new wing opened with the renovation by architect Odile Decq. I do not think it is a coincidence that in 2020 I was allowed to present such an experimental project. The museum has suffered from a lack of vision and continuity in project proposals. Having three years may seem like a limitation, but it all depends on your perspective. If you consider it as a traditional museum, it doesn't seem like much time. However, if you view it as an exhibition, three years is unusually long.

The concept of the museum as a magazine arose from the unique architecture of the MACRO, which spans over 10,000 square meters. I thought to myself, rather than trying to conceal its irregularities, let's embrace them and enhance its distinctive character. I thought of systematising it, giving it an order that was also spatially made up of paths, easy to use and easy to read. Every time I entered these spaces as a visitor, I felt bewildered and lost. I wanted to provide the visitors with tools to navigate it architecturally and conceptually. This meant including sections that touch on different disciplines. Integrating languages and disciplines not typically central to museums — such as experimental music, publishing, and graphic design — is also an effort to engage audiences with interests beyond visual art. It was precisely this notion that inspired me to initiate an experimental project accessible to the public, guiding them on a poetic and analytical journey to collectively question the formats, contents, and languages that should define a contemporary art museum today. The goal is to conduct research centered around reimagining the museum, exhibitions, and artworks, and to share this exploratory approach with as broad an audience as possible.

GC You entitled your project *Museo per l'Immaginazione Preventiva* (in English: *Museum for Preventive Imagination*), a clear homage to the *Ufficio per l'Immaginazione Preventiva* set up in Rome in 1973 by artists Carlo Maurizio Benveduti, Tullio Catalano, and Franco Falasca. Your decision sounds like a programmatic manifesto: their aim was to produce art capable of acting on society, how do you relate to such a proposal?

LLP The reference to Benveduti, Catalano, and Falasca's project stems from the desire to put the imagination at the centre of the museum. At a time when the storytelling of art is mainly linked to the market and the value of the works, the challenge is to work more with ideas than with money, given the limited resources available. I wanted

to pay homage in the title to a project that considered imagination as a driving force beyond an explicit political dimension derived from that historical period. As far as I am concerned, I also consider this project as militant. Militant, for me, is not the documentation of the political moment, but it is questioning. For me, being militant is thinking about communication: you can place the Mona Lisa in the museum, but what is the point if you don't bring people in?

GC Bringing your publishing experience to MACRO, you've envisioned the museum's space as a large magazine to browse through. Each room corresponds to a column. Can you expand on this decision?

LLP To make a magazine is to create an institution. Maybe an ephemeral institution, which has no physical space, even if there is the physicality of paper or the digital immateriality of the web, but it is an institution, for me. If this has a vision, it means you have built something. Being in front of the MACRO gave me a challenge: to try to bring that attitude and that aspect of questioning and self-interrogation inside the institution. Doing it in a museum with a very complex architecture, multiplied the levels of the challenge. My idea was to question the objects, eliminating the self-referentiality of art. A bit like a magazine: a place where you enter and read, walk, observe, in a fragmented, rhizomatic way, breaking linearity. This is why I decided to imagine the MACRO as a magazine, with an editorial grid of eight fixed sections. A grid designed to be broken and to produce improvisation. Perhaps the editorial idea may appear rigid, but it is only an apparent sensation because the whole thing is designed to produce freedom and improvisation.

I confess that for me the idea of an institution has always been associated with a form of power that, I don't want to say ostracised, but that often came across as something capable of confining, restricting, constricting, rather than a space of freedom. The editorial format is a response to rethink the paradigms of the museum, the exhibition, and the work by translating these formats into forms that might be accessible to a wide audience. If the museum is usually conceived as a great novel to be read in a linear form, the magazine format is more fragmented because it has a rhizomatic structure, to be leafed through in no particular order. In museums everything is allowed except improvisation, so often the exhibition ends up being a still life, identical from beginning to end. The magazine offers, on the contrary, a rigid structure that produces constant movement. This dimension seems to me to adhere to contemporary life where our way of experiencing things is irregular, and jagged. Visitors – or readers– are encouraged to navigate through the different elements and interpret them according to their own perspective, as subjectively as possible.

GC Would you say then that this constraint, this sort of grid that you have designed, actually offered you directly proportional flexibility and freedom to operate?

LLP The idea of the grid came out of our decision to set up a frame which we could then disrupt to force the walls of this imaginary space. The structure of the grid was conceived to legitimise improvisation, not as a constraint. When you want to improvise, you have to start with an element, otherwise you risk a chaotic outcome. This was an attempt to activate such a device so that it could fit not only a range of very different artists but also a certain typology of discipline, while respecting each one's specificity. I worked very hard on this aspect. Museums today are inclusive in embracing any form of experience and discipline, but at the same time they do this for reasons that do not always arise from a real interest in these languages, but rather from a need to satisfy a demand for something other than a classic museum or exhibition format. I believe it is essential for a museum not to diminish the intensity of a language, but, instead, to promote it. It's exciting to observe the connections, intersections, and changes occurring in this setting, aiming to reach as broad an audience as possible, especially considering that entry to the MACRO is free. This implies a responsability and an ambition to engage with an audience as wide as possible.

The museum's free admission enables me to plan programming that can be experienced non-linearly, much like flipping through the pages of a magazine. This ensures that everyone can find something of interest, as I believe the exhibition should be accessible to all, offering varying levels of engagement.

GC The title of your first exhibition as artistic director has been *Editorial*. A title that once again refers to the terminology of the print, signaling an intention towards future endeavors. What did you propose?

LLP The first exhibition was conceived as a statement of intent by animating the various spaces in an organic and expansive manner. It was the first exhibition in the museum's history to spread across all spaces, including the less functional and interstitial ones that are not usually used for exhibitions. This decision stemmed from from the desire to allow the public to discover and rediscover the museum's architecture in a manner that hadn't been fully explored before the museum's launch, showcasing all its articulation in the various rooms/rubrics.

GC You involve and showcase visual artists as well as writers, photographers, musicians, composers, filmmakers, and researchers. Why do you try to blend these diverse forms of expression?

LLP The openness to mixing genres, attitudes, and disciplines allows me to produce complexity on both a conceptual and linguistic level. The tendency on the part of museums to embrace all forms of cultural production has been present for many years now, yet often the various languages do not always dialogue profoundly. Many things happen in one place but a fusion between them is not always created. In the approach I have given to the programming, filmmakers, poets, visual artists, architects are placed on the same plane, pushing for hybridisation between these worlds. Like in an out-of-format magazine.

GC When I visited the museum, I had no problem tracing and understanding how you structured the spaces. At the same time, I got the impression that everything was very — forgive the term — dry. In the sense that the museum doesn't guide you, it doesn't force a narrative, it doesn't take you by the hand, but in some way it liberates and emancipates you, inviting you to create your own narrative. That may have to do with the title you have given the project, the idea of an imagination that lies at the centre of the museum *dispositif*. I would like to understand how you worked to achieve this: In contrast to the typical approach of museums, where a discourse is often imposed, you guide visitors along a horizontal dimension, fostering a process of questioning. This entails an idea of unlearning, a dismantling of expectations regarding what a museum should represent. I'm curious to learn more about how you pursued this objective and whether contradictions, criticisms, or dialogues with your audience play a role in this process.

LLP The principle is to be as horizontal as possible and not to impose an interpretation or narrative. I have always had an aversion to museums as an institution of power, which often imposes this power more or less consciously. Obviously, the museum also serves an educational purpose, but educating does not mean explaining something specific. I believe in people's intelligence and sensibility, and, hence, everything is calibrated very precisely. An exhibition such as that of Wolfgang Stoerchle, an artist unfamiliar to most, requires the captions to be written in a certain way in order to contextualise the work. The Nathalie Du Pasquier exhibition is nurtured by a different type of language and can be read without that type of instrument. It is a question of balance. This doesn't mean getting rid of captions in order to become more horizontal, but working to respect the artists' practices. The museum tends to side with the public, but sometimes it does so without fully respecting it. I am interested in working as far as possible from the point of view of the artists, or the way artists do, seeking to explore the creative process behind the work as well. Some

exhibitions, such as the *Artists' Library: 1989-2021*,[1] seek to provide access to artists' practices more laterally, exploring the thinking within them and seeking to do so in an engaging way. If the same exhibition had been set up on tables, it would have been very difficult to appreciate. The display we chose sparks people's curiosity, attracting them initially with the way we reconfigured the space.

The idea of having a system that in a certain sense abolishes openings is not something that can be instantly understood. It takes time to metabolise, like when you read a magazine for the first time. If you like the magazine, you start to read it and gradually begin to fully understand its rhythm. This is an experiment for those of us who are working on it, as well. We opened the second round of exhibitions within each of the sections and staggered their opening dates. This may have been overly ambitious as a choice. We are now working to recalibrate. Obviously, it is important to create a synchronicity and an affinity with the public, because this is anything but a routine way of proceeding. I would like to get to the point where people come to visit the museum independently of the individual exhibitions, like you do for museums of antiquity, where the museum is more important than the single exhibition. This is rare for contemporary art museums. In this sense, the idea of free admission is important.

GC MACRO is located outside the city centre, farther from Rome's classic attractions. I was wondering whether being in a residential area and having free admission enables you to establish a closer connection with the local public. The location and the program suggest the possibility of forming a connection with the local audience. In terms of content, what you propose is certainly rather specialised — experimental music, graphic design, publications, performances — content that is fitting for an art museum and has the intention of exploring the contemporary scene. What kind of public were you hoping for and who is your actual public?

LLP Our visitors tend to be rather young: they come to the museum, discover something, and want to come back. This audience seems to be open and receptive to diverse forms of expression. The museum's location — a residential area not far from the university district — is something we are working on for the future as well, to develop

1 *Artists' Library: 1989 – 2021* is a three-dimensional bibliography, an exhibition project from the 'Ufficio Bibiliografico' section, in which the public can meet and explore the ways a series of artists think, write, collect, and create: Noah Barker, Éric Baudelaire, Pauline Curnier Jardin, Claudia de la Torre, Maria Eichhorn, Simone Fattal, Aaron Flint Jamison, David Horvitz, Tobias Kaspar, Giulio Paolini, Walid Raad, Georgia Sagri, Luca Trevisani. Each artist was asked to select three books by other authors in any literary genre, published in 1989 or later, which were particularly important to their artistic development. The artists then each included a book they themselves produced.

projects more specifically addressed to the neighbourhood. We made an effort to in no way temper the radical nature of the concepts behind the exhibitions or the artists' work. In several sections the artist has *carte blanche*—such as the *In-Design* or *Palestra* sections. This is not something that artists take for granted, because they are stimulated to approach their work less conventionally than they normally would for a museum institution. We are trying to expand the level of experimentation and interrogation as far as possible.

Even our communication is more focused on the *octopus*[2] and on our free admission than on announcing "Come, there's an exhibition by Friedl Kubelka!" – a name that means very little to most people. Many of the artists we exhibit are not even well known among professionals, so this operation skips this sort of language. And therein lies the challenge: to develop projects by involving artists whose poetics are powerful and complex. In hindsight, having so little time to work, and such limited resources, inside an architecture as complex as this one led me to become even bolder. It is not easy to talk about a work in progress, because ideas need to be tested constantly and you have to have the wherewithal to understand how things are going, without dashing headlong like a train.

GC The operation you decided to do with the collection is somewhat counterintuitive; you did not immediately digitise everything. Instead, you asked an artist, the photographer Giovanna Silva, to reinterpret the archive.[3] You then printed out the materials in a large, wallpaper-like format and dedicated a very large space to them, in the wing that connects the old and new parts of the museum, naming it *Retrofuturo.* Is the outcome a work in progress that will evolve over time?

LLP The MACRO has 1,200 works in its collection. The first question I asked myself was how was it created, the second was how to deal with the fact that, except for the first year it was open, it was never really accessible. You glimpse the collection through the glass window at the entrance to the old wing; you are aware that it exists but you cannot access the spaces where it was meant to be enjoyed. This paradox made me think in general about the status of public collections. A large part of the works are locked in warehouses that are not accessible to the public and, despite the various rotations, our enjoyment of them is mainly

2 The octopus is the avatar representing the visual identity of the museum.

3 The collection preserved by the MACRO, located under the courtyard of the former Birra Peroni, consists of 1200 pieces purchased by the City of Rome between the 1950s and the early 2000s. Normally closed to the public, the MACRO collection has been represented and interpreted by photographer Giovanna Silva for the Museum of Preventive Imagination. Printed on large sheets of wallpaper, the images of the collections in storage cover the totality of the walls in the space. They, therefore, become the background and the context for the new works of young Italian artists, who will gradually occupy the space over the course of three years – a collection *in fieri,* which will grow organically over time.

mediated in the form of images. Today, we enjoy exhibitions on screens, works are sold on tablets, museums digitise their archives: we live in the imaginary museum thought up by André Malraux. *Retrofuturo* was conceived to be the section of the museum focused on the collection. In recent years, the exhibitions have always featured the same works, on a rotating basis, which is the way most museums commonly operate, with in-depth focuses and temporary exhibitions. Consistent with the idea of *unlearning,* I wanted to reflect upon the collection itself. Museums are asked to increase their collections, but at the same time their spaces remain unchanged. Except for the major museums that have the means to expand, most institutions have to deal with budget cuts and cannot invest in expanding their storage areas. They lack the resources for acquisitions, which, not coincidentally, take place within the sphere of trade fairs. Choosing a somewhat animistic path, I imagined the works from these great collections that spend their whole life in storage areas waiting to be summoned and brought to light. Many of them do not even have that possibility, for a variety of reasons. I am fascinated by the idea that there is an object so fragile that it cannot even be exhibited.

What kind of a life can this work have? It often exists solely as an image through its reproduction, or as oral history through people who talk about this object. This image piqued my curiosity, and I thought about the spaces that preserve the collections. The space of *Retrofuturo* is one that connects the two wings of the museum, like a sort of glue. The title itself is a reference to the transition from the historic building to the new one. We start with the existing collection to look to the future. From the very beginning, I imagined this space with giant black and white photographic reproductions, to look like I was in a different space, to produce the effect of an alienating experience.

When I called Giovanna Silva and asked her to accept this job, I gave her complete freedom to photograph, edit, and compose the images. The opening of *Editoriale* featured her exhibition only, as well as a piece by Lory D as the soundtrack for these spaces. The images taken by Giovanna Silva are not intended as a mere photographic documentation but constitute an authorial project. The photographs are exhibited in the form of giant wallpaper that serves as a display for the works of an in-progress collection dedicated to Italian artists of the new generations, a collection that will be constantly updated with new works and interventions. I said to Giovanna: This giant wallpaper was conceived to show the works in the collection of the future!

This is a collection in the making to which we add a new work every month and a half. Each intervention is different. Giulia Crispiani, one of the invited artists, worked directly on the wallpaper which she cut. There is something fleeting about it because it is both an exhibition and the presentation of a collection in motion. The commissioned works were also quite different from each other: one is a book, the other is a very ephemeral piece made with dust. There are various possible levels of interpretation.

GC Can you tell me about your team? Who does the design and how do you operate?

LLP I have a small, young, and flexible team. There are 15 of us with the energy and curiosity to embark on a Fitzcarraldian venture. The way the team is structured at MACRO is similar to the way a film crew works. It's as if we made twenty-two films a year with the same crew. There is a powerful synergy. I like to think of it as an editorial team that works in communicating vessels and in a more horizontal form than is usually the case in museums. Marco Campardo conceived the entire visual identity for the museum. He is also involved in the exhibition design for many of the shows. For example, Marco was responsible for the design of the displays in the Mario Diacono and *Artists' Library 1989-2021* shows. This is not just graphic design work; he plays a key role in building the exhibitions.

GC Earlier you mentioned the octopus, the avatar that characterises the museum's new communication: how did the idea come about?

LLP Working with Marco Campardo, we discussed on how to translate such a complex project into an accessible form with a strong and recognisable visual identity. Why not give the museum an avatar? I wanted it to be an animal, and the choice of the octopus was almost immediate. Who better than an octopus to represent an organic, sprawling museum? I wanted it to be special and designed by an artist. So I asked Nicola Pecoraro, who was with me in Vienna at the time, to make one. In less than 24 hours he drew several sketches, the same ones that now animate the MACRO campaign. I think this helps to create a sense of community.

GC What is the museum's relationship with digital communication channels? They also seem to be a space for production. The museum bulletin, sent via mail to the public, is written in the first person, as if it is the museum itself speaking. I find this choice symptomatic of the relationship you want to establish with the public...

LLP I have tried to make each element respond as coherently as possible to the original idea. It is essential that the communication be organic to the programme. The hardest thing is to find just the right balance between maintaining the total integrity of the project and its being accessible at the same time. Our choice to avoid focusing primarily on events runs counter to the current dynamics in the art world. Once again we return to the process of *unlearning.* The decision to speak in the first person stems from our intent to challenge ourselves and ask questions: Why must everything be in the third person? Why do exhibitions open and close and why are they always the same? Why does everyone always speak in such ascetic terms?" The positive feedback we have had has awed and surprised me, demonstrating that we often want to see something different, even though we later don't dare.

From the very beginning, we interrogated ourselves on how to use digital tools. We work primarily with the website and Instagram. We try to do very little but follow specific ideas. For example, the podcast *Dispatch* does not have a thematic approach but follows a stream of associations: the reading of a press release, the sound of birdsong in Madagascar, a poem by Amelia Rosselli, or the reading of a philosopher's essay. All within the space of twenty minutes, with the aim of piquing curiosity. On Instagram, we try hard to work on formats, to produce content coherent with the rest of the project. Digital space is a different type of space with its own specific characteristics. As in the museum, we try to include heterogeneous languages in order to cultivate them, on social media we do the same. That is our orientation. But then it is not up to us to decide whether it works or not.

GC How do you see the ongoing transformations in the definition of what a museum should be?

LLP I think the museum lends itself more and more to becoming software than hardware. This could mean shifting the priority from the display of art objects to a focus on practices and research oriented towards a non-objective outcome with increasingly blurred boundaries.

Museums as Shelters

In Conversation with Geert Lovink

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic, and Professor of Art and Network Cultures at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam. He has authored numerous influential books on contemporary digital systems, including the recent works *Stuck on the Platform* (2022) and *Sad by Design* (2019). In 2004, he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Through his research, Lovink delves into pressing issues such as internet cultures, social media architectures, and the psychological impacts of digital tools on our lives, aiming to uncover hidden mechanisms, inequalities, and social fragmentation.

GC How would you frame the relationship between museums and technology?

GL Museums have used computers for a really long time. So they are in themselves not backward institutions. Their problem is how to connect to a society that is changing very fast and is using and adopting technologies on a scale that we have never experienced before.

In the last 10-20 years, we witnessed an intense development phase of concepts, proposals, prototypes, best practices. Today I would say, as a provocation, that the process of digitization is more or less finished. Of course, some museums still need more time to digitise their collections, but on a large scale the process of digitization has been concluded. We can, therefore, say that the general overview is quite advanced. Nevertheless, the general perception in the art world, on print media, and in the public at large, is still that museums are behind. But this is not really an accurate picture. The problem is not really one of digitization. The questions are, for example: how do we make these materials accessible? How do we make a collection searchable? These issues are already much more interesting. And furthermore: do we want to use a search engine? Do we have our own search engine? Are we making ourselves dependent on a commercial third party? Many museums have digital copies of their collections; some others have outsourced these materials primarily to Google. That's where the story starts and that's where we are at the moment.

GC Do you know if there are any long-term plans regarding the use and dissemination of these digitized materials?

GL In my opinion we should leave behind what I call the *economy of free content* — where everything by default has to be given away free of charge — and move towards a peer-to-peer system — in which producers are paid for the work they do. All the digital tools necessary for that are already in place. The networks of information and communication will merge with those of finance, which means that an inevitable monetization and financialization of all data flows will take place. There are good and bad sides to the process. From the point of view of the creator this would be a completely new situation which allows one to earn a living by creating content. The creative community — artists, designers, writers, and representatives of many other professions — will benefit from the new system; they will ultimately be paid for their work. Nowadays, the internet is more of a 24/7 living environment. If we look, for example, at the evolution of online video streaming by comparing YouTube and Netflix, YouTube is a database and an archive, but it's losing to its streaming competitors. Although it's easy to access and watch content briefly on YouTube, the appeal of being immersed in a serie is far more compelling. That is why millions of people around the world pay for the content Netflix produces.

The problem is that museums themselves have not really found an appropriate response to the unprecedented scale of centralization. Museums like the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam can easily reach between two and four billion people on this planet. This is their potential, and they are aware of that. This is frightening, but what does that mean? If we exclude a few names of artists that act as real attractors, everything else is in danger of being lost. What do we do with the contemporary? What do we do with the history of modernism? The gap between what is mega and what is small or important for local contexts is growing exponentially. This is why there's often no strategy, no long term idea.

If we compare the current situation with past trends in website usage, we find striking similarities. The concept of museum websites was introduced, developed, and eventually questioned. Nowadays, direct traffic to museum websites has significantly decreased, with people primarily interacting with museums through third-party platforms. Direct engagement with museum websites is now rare, often limited to seeking basic information like opening hours. Even in those instances, visitors quickly transition to external platforms, such as e-commerce or payment gateways. So there's a five second opportunity for the museum to interact with the public through their website, then the visitors are already gone. And all the museums have to somehow participate in this race. They need to show that they are still relevant. There is no effective resistance or even acknowledgement that 95% of the museums will never participate in the real game. Instead, why don't we draw conclusions from this awareness and take a lot of very, very interesting collections in a completely different direction? Currently, almost all museums work under the same umbrella, even under the same digital umbrella, under the same social media umbrella, under the same platform, logic, and so on. We need to stop that. Or at least introduce an idea of diversity and diversification of strategies, which at the moment is not yet there. There is no diversification in the digital.

GC Actually, I can think of only a few interesting case studies that are trying to develop something different to the mainstream solutions. Most of the time, it's the smaller museums that have the flexibility to explore different solutions, while larger institutions tend to rely on more complex and structured providers.

GL Big institutions are the ones that benefit to the maximum extent of this logic of the mega brands, utilising the platform logic for their own purpose. It's really the smaller players, the ordinary museums, that are left out here.

GC John Stack, the former head of digital transformation at Tate, said it is the responsibility of the museum to go where the audience is and prompt

conversation online. Do you agree with the solution identified by the majority of museums to consider social media as a discursive and partecipatory space?

GL Social media platforms, as we know them, are not discursive tools. The internet in general might be, in theory, but the current social media architectures do not facilitate extensive exchanges. There is a historical reason for this. Social media grew out of a specific part of web culture of the blogs, in the early 2000s, after the baroque and excessive dotcom period of e-commerce had fallen to pieces. Social media picked up on the updating part of blog culture, and stripped off the content bit. For already 15 years, Facebook has been repressing the users' need for community tools. There is no value in it for them. People need to like and share, say something quickly, and move on.

GC However, most museums has designated social media as the most suitable tool to support dialogic practices and openness towards the public.

GL Social media platforms were not designed to foster debate. There is no openness whatsoever. All they do is monitor short exchanges and impressions. The platforms are used as measurement tools in marketing campaigns. The related ad firms in the background measure likes and retweets and clicks and sell these data profiles to third parties. It does not matter what people say on Facebook or Twitter. Facebook, Twitter and Apple platforms in particular are all US-American services that should be compared to shopping malls. Shopping malls are not public spaces, these are corporate environments under tight surveillance. Why is it so hard in the case of social media to accept this commercial reality? Pictures of art works are posted on museum sites for marketing reasons, not to facilitate a debate about the art's historical meaning or socio-political intentions. If we want to oppose this trend, we need to start building hybrid offline and online networks from scratch. The systematic denial among arts officials of the social media hegemony is a painful self-delusion. We still have to reassess the damage that the whole social media experience has done. Of course, the museum is proud when you take a picture of the installation or the painting you saw, and you post that on Instagram and other people come.

GC Indirect marketing...

GL Yes. But it also means that the museum itself becomes a vehicle, not the centre. It becomes a vehicle for other interests. And this is in my understanding, a dead street.

GC It's interesting that you are talking about social media like something from the past. Do you think they

are losing their power and impact? And what do you envision coming up as an alternative?

GL Yes, definitely. I'm talking about processes that will happen approximately in the next five years. There are a lot of indications that the whole ecosystem that was built around the social media platforms is eroding rapidly. The way it's financed, the whole ecosystem of advertisements, the influencer marketing machine is in trouble. After the Covid pandemic, we entered a new phase, and the future of the business models of social media is very uncertain. Every week we hear of redundancies of tens of thousands of employees.This is dramatic, and it comes very close to an implosion of an entire industry.

GC In your essay, *Extinction Internet* (2022), you argue that the internet is ending and that it is time for theorists, artists, activists, designers, and developers to imagine what is after the end of the internet as we know it. Is a different internet still possible?

GL In a situation like this, defined by cultural and economic forms of stagnation and regression, the revolution of the younger generations is not very likely. Today, underground culture cannot develop in opposition to the mainstream. This is the fundamental reason why we are in this situation. With regard to the internet, we have seen the concentration of power, centralisation, and monopolisation that comes from both the state and the corporations. But similar to climate change, all the warnings fell on deaf ears. The internet today is a weird combination of platform dependency and state surveillance. All of this creates a feeling that there is no exit, and we do not know where to go. In the meantime, we have all been stuck on the platform. 25 years ago, we thought that the internet was the solution to many issues. It took a long time to realise that the internet itself had become part of the problem — also credit to Evgeny Morozov, Sherry Turkle, Douglas Rushkoff, Andrew Keen, and many other internet critics, who highlight the issues.

GC Several times you have suggested as an ultimate solution to *deplatform the platform*.

GL If total disaster is to be avoided, it is not enough to just regulate the platforms, it is a false illusion. The problems are structural, indeed infrastructural: social networks are run by monopolists. Regulating platforms, or thinking of replacing them with European start-ups that only reproduce the model we have already seen, is not the solution. What is missing is a political roadmap on how to change the architecture of the internet. Collective actions that delete entire platforms as acts of civil disobedience are the way to go. It is important to emphasise the distinction between social networks and social media: one can leave the latter without

leaving the internet, which remains a useful tool for networking. The only real alternative lies in a European public infrastructure. A radical redesign of the internet is a medium-sized global challenge that can be realised in a short time if compared to the climate crisis, the migration crisis, or the need for housing, and the emergence of social inequalities. Redesigning must take place at local, national, and European level. We must act in Italy, in the Netherlands, without waiting for Brussels. European regulations come too late if they only address the problems that already exist. Regulation must be replaced by redesign. A social media that gathers billions of people cannot be profit-oriented. We need a public infrastructure and projects that infiltrate platforms and help users get off them.

GC It seems to me that politics is just beginning to understand what the problem is...

GL Yes, museums, politics, even universities, have been very slow to understand how it works, right? But this is an inherent problem, and I would never accuse art historians or museums of a lack of understanding. The lack of understanding is general and is found in literally every field. So it is not a problem exclusive to the arts. It took my field at least five years to catch up with what was going on, and it was hugely embarrassing. For insiders like me, working day and night on this for 30 years already, we were clueless.

GC In *Surveillance Capitalism* Shoshana Zuboff explains that what we experience for the first time, we don't really have the means to fully understand, and we try to deal with it with the tools we know from the past. The intensity of this digital turn was something completely new that we were not prepared for and for which we had no model from the past. But when we talk about the need, for example, for a political road map, do you think it is still something necessary and possible?

GL The problem with regulation is that we discuss instruments that in most cases are no longer relevant, everything is happening so fast. The law always ends up regulating something that has already passed; it takes so long to regulate that the object itself will have changed and vanished.

GC Is there a scope in regulating these phenomena?

GL I do not believe in legislation. Legislation for me comes at the very end and solidifies a social struggle that's been fought earlier. This is also the case with internet governance. For my generation, the ones that, since the early nineties, built up the internet, it has been about designing liberty, not just for the individual but also in terms of communities.

For many activists, the internet still holds the potential to become a vital platform for the commons. It describes a public infrastructure that is not owned or controlled by the state, nor by the markets, but by the people. In essence this is a political project that cannot be reduced to legal frameworks. The extra complication in the case of the internet is that it is a technical infrastructure, defined by global protocols. Attempts to re-politicise this field were hopeful for a while but now run the risk of going nowhere. To criticise US domination is one thing, but way more important are our own visions and organisational capabilities. How much do we understand about platforms, algorithms, and data centres?

How can we 're-decentralise' the internet without buying into nationalistic solutions and defensive mechanisms that only strengthen conservative and authoritarian control over its populations? Most engineers remain silent, and artists are no longer taking the lead, having gone post-internet. This leaves us with small pockets of digital-rights activists that act as lobbyists, facing the vastly larger lobby budgets of giants such as Google. We need to collectivise the problem. This can be done on multiple levels, simultaneously. Regulating Silicon Valley won't help. This is not a privacy problem that can be fixed by lawyers. Fines of billions of euros will not dent these giants. We have a step by step plan to reduce and then eliminate the influences of platforms. At what point do we need working European alternatives? We got Telegram and Signal as alternatives for WhatsApp, and Duckduckgo as a reasonable alternative for the Google search engines. While there are more examples like these, alternatives for all services have not yet been fully developed. As Brussels and national governments have not done anything to reduce our dependence on Silicon Valley this will take some time. We also need to focus on what needs to be centralised and what should be done locally. And what should become part of the public digital infrastructure? There is still the dream of federated, decentralised networks, but I have to admit that we did not deliver over the past decade at this point. The radical opposition has been too weak when it comes to building viable alternatives.

GC What do you think about data mining and profiling of exhibition visitors to improve the audience experience?

GL Michel Foucault's idea that we produce the power that governs us is increasingly proving to be accurate

GC Is there any hope for alternatives to post-propaganda scenarios? On several occasions you have spoken of organised networks and cooperative rebirth...

GL The aspect of free cooperation is ancient and was theorised as early as the 1970s. The core system of computers was linked through the first networks to share few resources, due to computing time. These activities were then coordinated through new levels of electronic communication, such as e-mail, chats, discussion groups. Howard Rheingold's work is a key example in this respect. As far as I am concerned, the story begins with initiatives such as Oekonux, the P2P Foundation, and Discord. The theory of free cooperation comes from the latter group. An important distinction in this context is between cooperation in a group, often with a boss, and free cooperation, which is driven by self-organisation. One has to work with concise and workable units; meaningful networks have an ideal size of 100-120 members. Groups work really well when they have about 15 members. Social media, in recent years, have trampled on these basic insights for commercial interest and have not compensated their users with tools that facilitate online collaboration.

GC However, a mismatch persists between the current critical discussion and the tangible influence of these concerns on museum practices..

GL What is missing in our context is a social movement in which technological criticism can flourish. Something comparable to feminism, the labour movement, or the ecological movement. We are stuck in self-designed, sometimes even comfortable ghettos, without the proper knowledge of how to reach a wider audience. No doubt, the urgency is there. We cannot even leave the explanation to historians because there are not many interested in the issue. It is undoubtedly a missed opportunity. When the internet became mainstream in the early 2000s, we were in the midst of a brutal neoliberal wave. There was a consensus among technology fanatics, entrepreneurs, and the mainstream media that drowned out any serious criticism by calling the objections obsolete. Without a proper understanding of the way the global data economy actually works, we can't effectively reinvent our culture. While building independent infrastructures remains of primary importance, net criticism needs updating and upgrading, before it becomes subject to deletion.

GC Do you see a way out for museums to explore the potential of the digital escaping the economic logics? And concretely, how would you bring it about?

GL Museums should start to acknowledge that they are part of a living network together with the people who visit their places, who care for them. Instead of working on the logic of imaginary or potential audiences that are somehow out there who need to be reached. This way would already define a very simple differentiation between the real existing museum and the real existing audience in comparison to its imagined one. Most of the managers can't even afford to do that because they have their visitor targets. That's a very tough and real game, so we cannot so easily make jokes about that. The pressure of that is very real.

GC Obviously, museums are struggling to receive fundings and to justify their presence: what could help to not simply perpetuate a neo-liberal museum model embedded in a capitalist economic system?

GL I think there is something museums, for instance, can learn from public libraries. The crisis of public libraries came earlier, and there are very good responses. A lot of public libraries were confronted with these issues and questions much earlier. For instance, they did not define themselves as a place for knowledge. To be successful, they needed to redefine themselves as social spaces.This was a huge change of the mindset, but public libraries became something where people wanted to be. You could say that's a direct violation of the Enlightenment, because you put the social aspect first and the knowledge second. But I think a lot of the museums will have to make some kind of similar turn. I think the exclusive and defensive idea of the protection of the artwork and the collection will have to be radically opened up. I think museums should rethink themselves as a shelter. People won't come for some kind of higher task, which may be seen as too exclusive, but museums appeal to their desire to be there, to experience it, to share the meaning of being in a social space together. If this is becoming the most important task, it also means that museums have to give in on a few other tasks that in the past maybe were very important...

GC What you are saying aligns with the museum's current commitments: fostering community engagement, facilitating dialogue, and negotiating content collaboratively.

GL I think this is a good thing. This is where the potential novelties of the next phase can come from. If museums, collections, or archives are just empty spaces, who cares? Even more so if that archive is digitised. The moment people start to realise that museums are not only very defensive but are defensive for no reason, because their collections are available digitally anyway, then it is really time to think about other goals and other approaches. And I think the definition of public space is the key.

Museums as Technology for the Commons

In Conversation with Nora Sternfeld

Nora Sternfeld is a scholar and curator, she publishes on contemporary art, educational theory, exhibitions, historical politics and anti-racism. She is currently professor for art education at the HFBK in Hamburg and co-director of the /ecm - Master Course for Exhibition Theory and Practice at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She is in the core team of *schnittpunkt. austellungstheorie & praxis*, a non-institutional platform to discuss and experiment different forms of exhibitions making. She is also co-founder and partner of trafo.K–Office for Education, Art and Critical Knowledge Production (Vienna) and since 2011 she is part of freethought–Platform for Research, Education and Production (London).

GC If we were to simplify, we can currently observe two extremes in the approaches of museums: on one end, there's a neoliberal model emphasizing complete accessibility and blockbuster exhibitions, often tied to a traditional educational framework. Conversely, there's the museum viewed as an arena, a space for lively debate and engagement, where relevance is brought forth by its participants. The events of the 2019 ICOM General Assembly in Tokyo perfectly encapsulated these contrasting museum philosophies. What are your thoughts on this interpretation? I'm particularly interested in exploring the origins of this divide and whether it's feasible to bridge the gap between these opposing viewpoints.

NS The unilateral model is not the most neoliberal, the discourse of participation is the neoliberal one. The neoliberal transformation of the museum used the demand of participation: with the demand for democratization comes also the neoliberal use of this demand. That's why I would rather say we have three different positions. The first is the unilateralism or conservative model, the nationally oriented idea of the museum. The second is the neoliberal, transnational market-oriented idea of the museum that has very much experimented with processes of participation, not to change society but to let capitalism grow. Then there is a third one, which is, of course, intermingled with the other two. It is a radical democratic approach of the museum as a place where we can discuss what history means to us, to understand the conflict of today, and to imagine the future differently. This is how I would describe the situation now.

Part of the debate on the ICOM definition was due to an existing conflict between the classical idea of the museum and a new one, but the way this was proposed was very much an alliance between the neoliberal faction and the progressive faction. If you propose a definition that is a mission, I think this is already very much a neoliberal way to go. Originally, the idea of an ICOM definition is based on the belief of a welfare nation-state and of a transnational agreement.

ICOM is very close to Unesco, diverging from the 19th-century nationalist aspirations aimed at fostering a sense of national identity and differentiation from other countries. Instead, it embraces a more transnational and collaborative self-concept, rooted in the notion of culture as a fundamental element of societal well-being. This shift can be traced back to the 1980s when museums began to operate as semi-private entities, coinciding with broader transformations in national governance structures from state-centric to market-driven approaches.

Even state institutions were turned into logics of the private economy, from classical bureaucratic organization forms to new organizational forms, new liberal bureaucracy. This is based on private

economic ideas. The transition of museums from being considered institutions of national welfare to adopting a private economic managerial approach was largely facilitated through the recall of participation as a practice within these institutions. It was defined *change management*: the participatory processes of the institution to imagine together the institution differently as a mission. Through this mission, the museum will undergo changes not only in its content but also in its organizational structure. Typically, following the mission statement, there is a restructuring of the organizational chart, which is a conventional approach to change management. However, I'm not entirely convinced by the idea of a collaborative process where our desired outcomes mirror our current actions. I'm not sure this is the right way to go.

GC Do you think it was a conscious decision in 2019 to propose a mission instead of a definition?

NS I'm not sure. I personally think that the people working in museums are already brainwashed into a neoliberal subject position, that they don't know the difference anymore between a definition and a mission. My criticism towards the mission character of the progressive faction of ICOM is conservative, the one that old-fashioned French National Museum people head against the progressive faction. The progressives said: You are presenting us not a definition but a mission, and we cannot vote for that. I think that somehow they are right. It's important to be able to make a difference between a definition and a mission.

To answer your question about a bridge, what we need is another definition. Why is the neoliberal position the common ground between the position of the national conservative museum and that of the progressive? I think we have other options, and this bridge could be something else. If the compromise between conservative and progressive is neoliberal, I think everything is going to turn not for the better but for the worst, that is, towards privatization. I propose to think about what could be a definition. For me, a museum is a place where people and material objects come together to understand what happened, what it means today, and how we can imagine a different future. I think this is a definition that undermines the history of national logic by proposing the relation to history as a human issue, as a worldwide concern. I owe this definition to Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, who was the founder of S A V V Y Contemporary and who is now the new director of HKW in Berlin. To agree on a definition is important because, with it, all the national committees of ICOM decide what is a museum and what is not a museum.

What would change if my proposal for a definition would be accepted? Many contexts of historical debate would then be counted as a museum. I think this would be very interesting: these places exist, but this would also shift the perspective of the museum from a very western-rooted context to something that humans do when they are together. To work on a definition that has this progressive element is undermining the western narration of the museum in it. This would be interesting. I think this would be the bridge.

GC Returning to the second part of the question: how do you envision this dialogue unfolding? How can we bridge the gap between expertise and full democracy? What strategies can we imagine for effectively integrating different voices within such a structure?

NS Concerning the past, in my imagination, I see the museum as the space where people and things come together to try to understand what happened concerning today. We will never know exactly what happened, but we need the material or immaterial sources to discuss it. We also have to be somehow honest with the material objects. This is what democracy is somehow all about concerning history. The museum should be a place where we try to understand, based on what we read about it. There will always be different perspectives. Not every perspective is possible: we have these sources, and we need to take them into account to understand what happened. The democratic relation to history is to look at the sources, to put them together, and to try to understand what happened.

Concerning the present: If the museum is democratic, it has to make clear that non-democratic meanings are not part of its process. This is a complicated point of the debate, but we should discuss it anyway. A museum should be like a radio station, where we debate what it means, the museum's role for our society today.

Concerning the future, it is sure that nobody knows what will happen. This work engages with democracy by examining conflicts and their integration into contemporary society. It's also a means of confronting and coexisting with conflict. If you are open to that, it is a democratic approach for me. This means that the contact zone is a conflict zone, that what is happening is still loaded in our bodies, in the narration, in the cannon, and so on. The question then becomes: as we navigate these conflicts entrenched in history and museum archives, can we envision a different future? One that isn't solely constrained by the suppressed conflicts and limited imagination inherent in existing possibilities? This is much more playful, but it's also a promise that we have in historical institutions like museums. Based on the sources and the confrontation with the conflict reality, collaborative work on new horizons is possible.

GC Do you think then that the core mission of a museum is to activate dialogue?

NS My idea is that the museum is more an institution that has historical knowledge and historical materials. From that comes the need for a debate. You share where you think you stand, understanding history and creating a context where a debate is open. In this sense, I'm against the idea of a facilitator because it creates a fantasy of a neutral mediation position that doesn't exist. Of course, museums are part of the societies we live in and can have resistance against the government, but they are public institutions. They come out of a hegemony in a certain society, they are not neutral, and they have to understand that. So actually, I think it's more about understanding the history, the part of the existing hegemony, and then the material and the space that is there, also as infrastructure. This infrastructure is here to be the place where the debate around history happens, but not in the sense of creating this image of a neutral position of a facilitator.

GC I know that, for example, ethnographic museums are already quite advanced, and the staff negotiate temporary solutions with the audiences to the problems that may arise. Instead, museums of contemporary art or design and architecture find more complex approaches to integrate other voices in their structure. Or is it just my impression?

NS I think that especially in contemporary art, in recent years, there has been a huge questioning of the western canon, which organized an old idea of contemporary art based on the hegemony of the western bloc.

GC Absolutely. The impact of these discourses on content is really visible. In some cases it is even moving, you can almost perceive the pain of institutions that need to rethink their mission, discourse, and practices completely. But if that's pretty clear on the content level, on a structural level a traditional division between who is producing the knowledge and who is benefiting from this knowledge is still really rooted.

NS In many places in the world, in contemporary art, people experiment with new structures of self-organization. I know that for example in Berlin, for the re-opening of the new Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the new program brings these two parts together: the participatory part and the content part. I think it's a very interesting new approach. Every day they do something, and I think that it's based on listening to the people. It's an example where these two things shift in relation to the content and to the organizational structure; somehow both happen at the same time. Another example are the people who worked with Lumbung Radio for the last Documenta. The radio project

is still running: it started with Documenta 15, and it's open every Wednesday for an online plenary session, welcoming everyone who wants to join and meet. It's really interesting how they are structurally organized: the people who join on Wednesday make the program together for Lumbung Radio. At the moment the infrastructure is based in Finland, and they received a grant for the coordination of it. They are now working on getting money in Mexico. We don't know if it will work out for the next 20 or 100 years, like a museum.

GC Maybe in the future the museum will take a shape that we cannot even imagine at the moment. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, for example, at the beginning of 2000, argued that potentially the museum of the future doesn't need to be a building but could be a series of processes. I'm wondering if museums are transforming into something completely different from what we have experienced. Maybe the core — this idea of a place of reflection about past, present and future — can still be the distinguishable feature of a museum.

NS I think this element will always be there. There is no way that people live together without relating to their past. I believe it's something everyone needs: this memory from before I was born, which helps me understand many of the conflicts that exist. This is something we need. It's extremely important, and that's why I think this will always exist. I also believe that history comprises the struggles that are deeply ingrained in our bodies, thoughts, and relationships. It's essential for us to confront and understand these struggles, as failing to do so may result in unconscious perpetuation within society.

GC What about the impact of technology on all these processes? In the 2010s, there was a significant emphasis on participation, accompanied by numerous questions and criticisms regarding this concept. Museums had long sought digital technologies to facilitate dialogue with the public. However, I find myself increasingly concerned and frustrated with many of the solutions I encounter in my research. It seems that rather than being intellectually challenged or supported, the public is often merely influenced by technology. On one hand, technology is introduced with naive enthusiasm, under the assumption that progress is inherently positive. While concerns are voiced in other fields, such as media theory, they don't always translate into the practices of museum visitors. Concurrently, visitors bring their own practices into museums, prompting reactive responses from these institutions.

NS I agree with you. I think it's extremely problematic: as you said, all the proposed forms of digitalization of the museums are not progressive. To find progressive ones, we have to align museology with progressive technology. I see that the way technology is discussed is based on platform capitalism. But technology is not in itself capitalistic. I work with Station of Commons, and I relate a lot to Constant, a feminist and very political server in Brussels. My inquiries on the topic are largely grounded in the historical notion that museums have traditionally been spaces of the commons, rather than being directly linked to the technological commons. However, I see potential in technology because it still reflects the underlying principle that knowledge expands when shared. Capitalism found ways to implement scarcity most terribly: the tech giants are now digitizing everything. They have this capitalist totalitarian fantasy that one day they will have every book and if you need to read, you will have to pay. This is happening at the moment. Digitalization is like stealing, like taking away the commons from the people and making them private property. I deeply disagree with that. I think that museums, more than any other institution in our society, should become technological commons. This is their role in society, to work on history for the commons. I think technology is a field in which radical museologists have to go.

GC Could you elaborate on you idea of museums and the commons? How do you envision it? Over the past decade, museums have heavily invested in digitalization efforts, yet it remains unclear whether there was a comprehensive vision for utilizing the vast amount of data generated. How do you propose the commons could facilitate the return of digitized data to the public? Furthermore, how can we navigate the limitations imposed by copyright laws?

NS I believe this is a critical issue, particularly concerning copyright. It's something that requires collaboration between legal experts and programmers. We need to ensure that the digitization process is conducted in a manner that prioritizes public accessibility and prevents privatization. Digitization, if mishandled, risks privatizing a resource that should be accessible to all. In this context, we have a significant responsibility to combat the privatization of history. Currently, privatization is a growing concern in the digital realm, and we must counter it with digital strategies that prioritize the commons.

GC A clear example of this is the dominance of tech giants with platforms like Google Arts and Culture.

NS It is something that every museum has to fight. Each institution needs to find its own ways of negotiating accords to its needs.

GC Is there an alternative already taking place in this Commons direction?

NS I'm not sure. We can say Google is very powerful, but who has the material? We should not give it away. We have to experiment on many levels and that's the biggest topic for progressive museology at the moment.

Reimagining the Role of Cultural Institutions

In Conversation with Erica Petrillo

Trained as a political philosopher, Erica Petrillo works as an independent curator and researcher at studio 2050+ in Milan. In 2019, she was artist-in-residence at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht where she developed an exhibition on the production of meat in vitro. In recent years, she has worked for institutions such as MoMa in New York, the Guggenheim in Venice, and the Triennale in Milan, curating events, exhibitions, and public programmes.

GC Would you start by defining how your practice has changed in the different institutions you have collaborated with in recent years? You have been a curator and researcher at MoMa in New York, at the Guggenheim in Venice, at the Triennale in Milan, at the Venice Biennale, and presently you work for Studio 2050+.

EP Curatorial work in institutions generally involves many bounds: with respect to agendas to be followed, themes to be dealt with, compromises with people who sponsor the work. This is the case both when working for a public institution and when working for a private studio. Moving between these constraints, I am concerned not so much with being political and critical from a thematic point of view — because any topic can be approached critically and politically — but with how working relationships are managed and whether value is placed on the time one invests in something. I did not study curating, art, or design. I studied political philosophy. I worked for a year and a half with Amnesty International in Tel Aviv, and I realised that such a direct and activist way of talking about politics wasn't suited to me. So, I made the decision to reinvent myself as a curator in order to continue pursuing my agenda, but with a more holistic approach. I've often used the phrase 'pursuing my agenda in a more transversal way' when discussing my work with others. This approach has proven effective, particularly as museums in recent years have felt compelled to move away from their traditional roles as exclusive institutions.

GC In this respect, I find the events that unfolded within museums in 2019 particularly intriguing: during the ICOM General Assembly, there was a proposal to approve a new definition of a museum. However, it faced opposition from several national committees, as it was perceived more as a mission statement rather than an accurate reflection of the current state of affairs. Consequently, an interregnum emerged, leaving cultural institutions in a state where they no longer identified with the old definition, yet hadn't established a new, shared one. I have the impression that at the moment the institutions are experiencing a very strong friction between the will, the need, and the feasibility of change.

EP I agree wholeheartedly. I often ask to what extent is my involvement in these dynamics instrumental to the survival of these state institutions. All the effort and energy we put into these institutions allows them to survive.

For instance, for the Venice Biennale 2020/21, Russia invited Studio 2050+ to renovate the architecture of its National Pavilion. Ippolito

Pestellini Laparelli, the commissioned curator, invited the Pavilion Commissioner to interpret the circumstances as a stimulus to rethink the meaning of renovating an architectural representative of a national institution in the 21st century. Talking about national pavilions in 2020, when the nation-state narrative was supposed to be outdated, is particularly worth reflecting on if we consider that the pavilions are lush enclaves in Venice, remaining open for only six months but without offering service or any form of exchange whatsoever, either with the local citizenry or with passing streams of tourists.

The idea was, therefore, to rethink the role of cultural institutions in their architecture and symbolic value, starting with the renovation of the Russian Pavilion. A pretext to explore the public function and social relevance of cultural institutions in times of global crisis.

GC And then the Covid pandemic exploded during the preparation of the installations. The Biennale, like every other cultural event, was also postponed. How did you decide to operate?

EP The Pavilion was rethought in digital format. The move to the web allowed us to react and reflect on this moment of crisis almost in real time. The title of the platform became *Open?* We committed ourselves to maintaining all the commissions we had set up and taking them forward on the only plan possible at the time, which was the digital plan.[1] The website initially functioned as a container of very different contributions. We did not want to replicate the overexposure and oversharing going on in most cultural institutions, and we rethought the temporality of our intervention by publishing only one content per week. We focused on two formats: *Voices* and *The Gamer.*

The limitations of the pandemic became an opportunity for us to investigate the modes of communication, exploring new formats and a new environment, expanding the project beyond the limits we had given ourselves, adding several components that could not be implemented in physical space. For instance, the *Voices* programme — a diverse collection of positions on the present and future of cultural institutions — was launched in collaboration with *e-flux*. It was not conceived for the physical exhibition, but it is a project born with an online platform. When the Pavilion reopened, in May 2021, we presented the result of the format in a publication where all 18 commissioned original contributions were collected. The designers and thinkers involved — Marina Otero Verzier, Jonas Staal, Emanuele Coccia, to name but a few — were invited to reflect and respond to the theme *Towards Other Institutions*.

1 Work on the physical building (design by the Russian-Japanese firm KASA Architects, Aleksandra Kovaleva, and Kei Sato) and the *Open?* exhibition were completed for the 2021 edition.

GC How did you address the challenge of translating content originally designed for physical display into digital formats?

EP This is a very interesting aspect, because it is one of the first things we wondered about when we decided to translate the exhibition digitally. We asked ourselves how to imagine a virtual space that could interfere with the existing Pavilion, but in general we tried to avoid acting too literally and creating a surrogate for the physical space. For *Open?* we imagined the platform in an alternative way, making it the main communication tool. We also focused on videogames and the idea of digital environments as spaces of experimentation and reinvention. This also allowed us to get back to the original question of what is, and what is the value of, a museum today. Instead of trying to answer it traditionally through streaming conversations with experts, we connected strangers playing online. Obviously we did not expect them to sit in virtual chairs and chat about these issues. However, some insights emerged from that realm. For instance, the understanding that identities are far more fluid and constructible/deconstructible than previously thought. We recognized this potential as a crucial element that should be incorporated into cultural institutions of both the present and the future.

GC Why exactly through video games and not blogs, chats, or other digital formats?

EP Gaming environments have allowed us to test political, social, and ecological realities that are difficult to experience otherwise. Video games are an area of great experimentation in Russia, which is one of the largest markets in the world. Despite strong corporate or government surveillance, digital spaces still offer degrees of freedom to explore. From our point of view, they could be experimented with as places where other institutional models could be tested. Given the different, sometimes looser, regulation of the digital space, we were also able to give space to some dissident voices. We chose three independent video games with immersive experiences, in which there is nothing to win, but which offer a reflection on our intimate relationship with digital space and, significantly, the possibility of building alternative worlds and gamification. The three games were *Yuha's Nightmare* by Yulia Kozhemyako (aka Supr); *It's Winter* by Ilia Mazo; and *Sanatorium Anthropocene Retreat* by Mikhail Maximov. The latter was commissioned and set within the Russian Pavilion, thus allowing it to be experienced even during the lockdown days.

GC On the other hand, the *Open?* site seems to have been structured in such a way that it does not leave the curator the possibility of establishing a narrative path for the content...

EP This is a central point. Normally in the physical space of a Pavilion, contents are organised according to a curatorial and spatial sequence. By proposing an editorial project on a digital platform, we transformed event scheduling into an act of curation. We prioritized interface design, organizing the content into a chronological sequence. We were aware that we had to strike a balance: while the absence of a narrative direction was a challenge, we addressed it by introducing new content to enhance visibility.

GC I know that you also emphasized ecological considerations during the project's development.

EP Yes, the site is low-intensity, extremely primitive even in its layout, for a conscious use of data. We collaborated with designer Lorenzo Mason to achieve this. The website, in its own small way, was an attempt to counteract the *digital obesity* of our lives. For example, we avoided live events and proposed a slower pace of consumption. We are too unaware of the impact data has on our lives, material space, and the planet.

GC In your experience, what is the potential of technologies in museums in building dialogues with the public?

EP Somewhat by chance, I always found myself working with people who were aware of and had previously done research on new technologies. Paola Antonelli at the MoMa had included digital elements such as the videogame Pacman or the @ symbol for the first time in the history of a museum collection. While Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli for the first time in the field of architecture started to look at the physical infrastructure that enables the existence of our digital lives. In both cases, working with them, I found myself colliding with or reflecting on issues related to new technologies. However, these technologies were typically the focal point of an artistic, curatorial, or research project, rather than simply serving as tools. Personally, I find it uninteresting to utilize immersive technologies or other digital tools solely to enhance the visitor experience. Instead, I find it more compelling to view these technologies as potential subjects of investigation and research.

It is important to remember that museums are often seen as intimidating and inaccessible places, contributing to an atmosphere of elitism. Certainly, digital technology is often used to make these places more accessible. There are also good examples: *Minecraft* is often adopted by cultural institutions. A few years ago, through the multiplayer game mode, some players created an island that is one of the largest libraries in the world. There is a corner there where many texts censored by regimes such as those in North Korea, or Iran, or Afghanistan are collected. The player who has access to *Minecraft* potentially has access to these banned texts. It would be interesting to see how museums could apply such strategies.

GC Does our constant immersion in the digital realm, even when we're not directly using digital tools, influence the experience of an exhibition? When curating an exhibition, do you consider how it will be experienced digitally?

EP These are certainly elements that are taken into account when developing a curatorial concept or when devising an installation set up. No one would admit it explicitly, but in an exhibition you think about the Instagrammable aspect at some point. It's unfortunate to admit, as the core of an exhibition should be its concept, but unfortunately, this is often the case nowadays. In the exhibition *Broken Nature* curated at the Milan Triennale, the most Instagrammable element was the mirror room. Scientist Stefano Mancuso had curated the exhibition, *The Nation of Plants,* by creating a space about the personality of plants using mirrors as a narrative pretext. While I think it is inevitable to embrace change and just go with it, I also think it is necessary to do so intelligently. If Instagram culture, characterized by our constant craving for images, one after another, prevails and cannot be countered, perhaps it makes sense to consider how to intelligently embrace this trend. Perhaps instead of providing content that is impressive but empty of meaning, one can instead think of a particularly theatrical room, but one that through its theatricality wants to communicate something to us.

GC You have expressed a very critical position regarding the heritage and historical presence of museums: how do you see their future?

EP Today, even the most brutal criticism addressed to a museum is also the reason why this museum survives. Even the most violent, most witty and intelligent criticism gives the museum an opportunity to say: I am aware of the enormous injustice and mistakes on which my history is based, but I am also aware of a possible redemption, precisely because I am so aware of my weak points. If there were not this immediate awareness of these weaknesses, then museums would probably crumple in on themselves. This short circuit, this loop, is really fuelled by self-criticism, isn't it? When I realise that I am an instrumental tool in maintaining the status quo through self-criticism, I think there is no way out. It's really the idea of capitalism's ability to reinvent itself, to self-generate even through mechanisms of self–cannibalism. So, it's a matter of our own responsibility. I'm uncertain about the extent to which we're willing to engage with these realities.

Museums Have Always Been Participatory

In Conversation with Ross Parry

Ross Parry is a scholar of digital heritage and a historian of museum media and technology. He currently works at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. Over the past twenty-five years, he has followed and analysed the digital evolution of museums. He is the author of some seminal books such as *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change* (2007), *Museums in a Digital Age* (2009), and *Museum Thresholds: The Design and Media of Arrival* (2020).

GC First of all, I would be interested in framing with you the contemporary practice of the active visitor in the post-digital museum.

RP I think both of those words, *active* and *visitor*, deserve attention. *Visitor* is interesting as a concept: as soon as we utter that term and decide to use that nomenclature, there is a risk that we're committing to a set of assumptions. We are already defaulting to those a priori categories and those foundational concepts that museums have already had. Now, we may find that reassuring because it aligns us to a long heritage, history, and institutional memory, but equally, as soon as we call someone a *visitor* and say that word, it shuts down other versions of that person's potentiality in their identity and their relationship with the museum. If we use the term *audience*, then that does something similar. If we say *learner,* then that might do something else. If we say *user*, then that will say something else as well. What if we say *patron*? What if we say *customer*? What if we say *person*? What if we say *disabled person*? What if we say *child*? What if we say *resident*? Or *local resident*? What if we say *tourist*? What if we say *researcher*? Suddenly the word *visitor* that we used at the beginning of this conversation, the *active visitor*, creates a completely different constellation behind us, and it makes us imagine and conceive what that person is in a different way.

The concept is not dissimilar if we look at what happens to the *digital visitor*. There was an interesting evolution of the word *user*, back in the '60s and '70s. The user of technology in the museum was very much an operator, it was almost an anonymous person who was inputting data or extracting data. The user was simply the means by which the technology started, stopped and changed. So he was completely anonymous, highly generic and homogenised, with no sense of that person being in the world or being a person. In the '80s and '90s the word *user* was used in a different way. A different focus has been added about how those users were human beings with specific needs. Museum experts started to think about personalization of interface and adaptability technology. That word still gets used, but now we realise that a *user* is an individual, a personality, a unique life. What happened in the last ten years is that we started to notice that the *user* is in the world, and, actually, the technology that they are using is just a tiny fragment; it is a spot of light in their life and in their wider kind of universe. It means that, actually, it has gone from us thinking about how technology is used to how we think about the user as an individual, to actually knowing how the content and the activity with the technology is useful.

I say all of that because I think words matter. As soon as we say *visitor* we are, by defaulting to that traditional model of an individual, making a decision with the intention to be part of a space and an experience. Whereas the ways in people encounter museums are highly complex: In just five seconds, we can have a museum experience and then move on. We might pass through a Wikipedia page or scroll through a museum's social

media feed, tweet, or hear a news story on the radio. We could catch an expert speaking for ten seconds in a documentary on TV, pick up a book and spend ten minutes reading about what was published by a museum, or see an object on a poster that's cared for, researched, preserved, and shared because of a museum. Those are all museum experiences.

The other interesting thing is the word *active*. Visitors are active as much as they are connected and part of the circuitry of the experience. As soon as the visitors walk into the gallery with a smartphone and are offered a QR code connecting them to the space, they become part of that ensemble, of that display. They are a contributor, co-authoring, they are invested in a prosumer-producer role, which is very exciting. Visitors are active in that regard, the person in the space is not just the passive recipient of that space but becomes part of that environment. Maybe they even affect the experience that other people are having in that space. I guess there's also another sense of *active visitor*, being the *person activated*, so what they do once they've left. Sometimes when we use the term active visitor, we mean activism and activist, and the way in which someone has intentionality afterward. If visitors after they have seen an exhibition talk about it, start to do something about it, think about it in different ways, then these visitors are active in the world, not just active as part of the design of the experience in the space, but they have been *activated*. It's not just that I'm active in that space, it's not that I'm just activated, but I'm activating as a visitor as well, which means that I can choose to co-curate, to change the display, to challenge the display, to bring my own voices, to bring different visitors, to interpret differently with my own tour. The ways in which a visitor has a very activating presence can challenge the museum. I guess that the word *active* can go off in different directions, from active to activated, to the activating visitor, and even the activist visitor. It would be fun to think about how that word extends into those different possibilities.

GC If I could add two more elusive words, one would be *education*. Typically, it's the museum that initiates discussions and proposals. I'm curious about how the public can actively engage in dialogue with the institution rather than merely receiving information, especially when hierarchical structures persist.

The other challenging term that could spark a broader discussion is *participation*. The museum has traditionally been seen as a space where specialized individuals work. However, there is now a growing understanding of the museum as a platform for exchange and negotiation.Can technologies support these processes and how?

RP The concept of a 'participatory museum' was not coined in Nina Simon's book (2010). I think museums have by definition always been participatory. This results in the act of showing up, the act of walking through the door, the concept and the reality of a person choosing to enter a space and interact with other human beings. But also to see, move, breathe, hear, spend time, and to build their own narrative through that environment. They're participating in that public, social space, in the museum's social-spatial architectonics. It is a collective endeavour where people come together in a specific space to see a particular arrangement of knowledge, and it is by definition participatory. Even going back to an English context in the 18th century, in the most hierarchical and exclusive and controlled of those early museum experiences, if we were going to a country house, and we wanted to see the ceramics and the tapestries, the housekeeper would unlock a cabinet and take out objects to show them to us. We were still participating. Even if as an experience it is very linear and controlled and not very social, it is a form of participation. So, the first thing I would say is that I do not see participation as something we need to understand, because museums weren't participatory, but now they are, by definition, participatory.

In terms of what technology can do in that regard, Clay Shirky is really helpful in describing the network as an environment that gives us an unprecedented means to converse, assemble, and act collectively. That is probably a good starting point to think about why technology affects participation. It enables assembly at pace and scale in a distributed way. It enables conversation that is pluralistic and polyphonic and happening asynchronously in a way that's not possible with other media. I might add that this model of participation enables me to make a contribution to the network. We can all be producers, we can all be makers, we can all be editors, we can all be storytellers, we can all be collectors, we can all be linkers of data, we can all be individuals who are working creatively and analytically together. When the network becomes our common space and when data becomes our current common currency, then that former participation again is amplified in terms of its scale and pace.

I think museums have always been participatory, and technology gives us that pace and scale of assembly, connectivity, conversation, and collective action. There is nothing particularly exciting and new in what I've just said, but three aspects are interesting within this environment. The first aspect is how everything I've just said is probably culturally contingent and culturally specific. The very notion of the network, where that connectivity exists: who has access to that network, the rights, what is legal, who has the resource and the capital and opportunity to be part of the network, that is culturally contingent. The extent to which the cultures of use and the expectations of what's possible and how we might convene, dialogue, collectively act and produce societally will be different, but, in the context of the museum, they will also be different. The expectation that the museum might be a place for us to do all of those things may mean one thing in Mexico but something different in Greece, Ireland, China, Nigeria, or Ghana. We need to understand how the coordinates of active visiting are also predicated upon where we are culturally.

The second aspect is about access and design. When we continue to create the *platform* museum, the *connected* museum, the *virtual* museum, and whatever we want to call these different digitally enabled versions of this ongoing project called Museum, are we ensuring that they are accessible for everyone in terms of the full diversity of human beings? It is absolutely fundamental for us to constantly question whether what's being produced in the digital space, in the network, is for everyone. The final aspect: what do we think and mean when we say platform, network, web, and connectivity? Our notions of where that is, who controls it, what is possible in it, and when we encounter it, are changing.

GC Maybe another interesting aspect is the speed of technological development and diffusion in society: how much is what the museum offers influenced by the audience and how long is a long-term relationship with this media?

RP There are moments when technology has an influence over both the museum and society. Equally, there are moments when society and the behaviour of people, the ideologies of people, and the actions of society significantly outweigh what's happening in technology and what the museum as policy and strategy might mean. I wouldn't say it's about one, but rather, it's about the interplay between people, technology, and the museum, and how it is never stable and so diverse in different cultural settings around the world. I think it's a three-way interplay between technology, people, and museums. In moments of conflict and warfare, moments of atrocity, moments of revolution, moments of profound societal change in rights and movement, it's not the technology that is the fundamental change for the museum, but it's society. But equally, there will be moments when our museum sector professionalises or standardises its approach, a moment of cooperation and collaboration, the establishment of icon, the establishment of collection management standards, the establishment of professional development frameworks, of museum studies curriculum, of ethical codes of policies over spoliation, restitution and repatriation. You know, there are moments when the museum sector is actually in a position where it chooses to lead and to make a decisive kind of change to its frame and to its definition. What do you think about this?

GC I believe the answer to this question is far more complex than I can provide at this moment. I'm concerned about the challenges museums face with tech giants and social media platforms, as they may seem like convenient solutions. They are perhaps even cost-effective compared to developing more intricate or bespoke solutions. However, I wonder if in many cases there is a lack of deep awareness regarding the ethical implications of these choices. Today, we are more knowledgeable of certain issues such as surveillance, capitalism, and data mining than we were five years ago. Therefore, I question how museums, given their influential role in society, can reconcile their agendas with those of digital monopolies. I don't have a definitive answer. Unfortunately, I do not see strong stances, solutions, or alternatives emerging. While there are meetings, symposia, and discussions on these matters, I do not observe a tangible impact or stance in the daily practices of museum visitors. I'm unsure if you share this perspective.

PR I certainly agree with your account of what we need to confront. When we reflect on history, we see the museum's evolution, from being under state control to being utilized for nationalistic agendas and as a tool for mass industrialization. These historical moments bear similarities to our present circumstances. However, the enduring concept of the museum persists because its fundamental idea is profound. It serves as a gathering place where we can collectively preserve what is significant to us, foster learning and mutual respect, find inspiration, nurture creativity, and contemplate our past actions, our identities, and our future possibilities. This idea's resilience is remarkable; it transcends the constraints of any controlling system that surrounds it.

The central factor in this situation will be the individuals within museums who make decisions. These decisions range from selecting databases and choosing Creative Commons licenses for data to deciding whether to encourage visitors to use phones, implementing surveillance cameras and CCTV in galleries, hiring consultants, and selecting companies to design audiovisual materials for exhibitions. Given the significance of these decisions, scholars have spent the last five years focusing on one project at a time, assisting museums in enhancing their digital literacy. It is essential for the profession to grasp digital ethics, comprehend the implications of using data and specific technologies, and address questions regarding authenticity, trust, truth, and accuracy. Moreover, it's crucial for the sector to determine what tasks should be handled internally and what should be outsourced. Networking and sharing knowledge are fundamental to achieving these objectives.

The most crucial action we can take in a time of concern regarding the power of technology is to enhance digital literacy across the sector. One of the positive aspects of the museum field is its collegial nature; it thrives on collaboration rather than competition and can mobilize effectively. I hold an optimistic view on this matter. It's undeniable that various entities, whether large tech companies or more nefarious parties, have always sought to leverage data throughout history. However, it is our professionalism, academic rigor, ethical standards, collegiality, and digital literacy skills as a sector that provide us with the best chance of overcoming these challenges.

Digitize Italian Museums

In Conversation with Antonio Lampis

Between 2017 and 2020, Antonio Lampis was Director General of Museums for the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism. For a few months, he also managed the interim for the Reggia di Caserta and other museum centres. Prior to this role and since September 2020, Lampis has held the position of Director of the Italian Culture Department at the Autonomous Province of Bolzano.

GC During your tenure as Director General of Museums from 2017 to 2020, you faced a delicate phase for museums. Your leadership coincided with significant discussions surrounding the formulation of a new definition of museums, and your term concluded shortly after the onset of the pandemic. I am interested in discussing with you how the ongoing debate on the new definition of a museum has been experienced by Italian institutions.

AL Personally, I don't give much importance to official definitions. Museums are entities closely associated with a new leadership paradigm, often embodied by the museum director, who is arguably one of the most influential figures in the cultural landscape today.

GC The Italian situation of museum management is quite peculiar compared to most other European countries, and it is characterised by a very close link to the political government in office...

AL Italy's national museums are public institutions overseen by the Ministry of Culture (MiC), managed through the General Directorate for Museums and the Regional Museum Directorates operating throughout the country. In 2014, then Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini initiated a significant reform of the managerial appointment system within the Ministry. Prior to this reform, directors of state museums were typically officials of the local superintendency, with varying degrees of experience in the Italian public administration, selected by the superintendent. These appointments were made through an internal process within the Ministry, often from individuals who had successfully passed a public competition. Under the Franceschini reform, directors of state museums are now selected through an international competition, based on qualifications and interviews. A commission comprised of experts and academics in the field is appointed to evaluate applications and propose a trio of candidates to the Minister for selection. Once appointed, directors serve a four-year term, with the possibility of renewal for a second term.

GC What guidelines have you established regarding the mandate for improving accessibility at cultural sites?

AL In 2018, we launched the National Museum System, a network of interconnected museums and places of culture. It was a project that had been under consideration for some time, aiming to enhance the enjoyment, accessibility, and sustainable management of cultural heritage. The project has been a worldwide vanguard, positioning Italy at the forefront of international museology and enhancing its competitiveness

in the tourism industry. The network encompasses a multitude of Italian museums, including not only state museums but also regional, private, and diocesan institutions. The driving force for this project was the European decree of 2018, which emphasised that cultural heritage is often underestimated in the effects it can have on people's growth, economic development, and employment. To achieve these objectives, sustainable, participatory, and multi-level governance was needed. This is exactly the intuition from which the reform of museums started several years ago. A national networked system of museums. Minimum levels of applicability were published, spread over several areas, such as the organisation of collections, communication work, and relations with the territory. The consistency of criteria in the quality of proposals serves as a crucial document for result verification. Institutions were interconnected and subsequently accredited through a digital platform. Moreover, they participated in a shared training initiative. This systematic approach leads to a pathway for growth.

GC What is the impact of this operation for visitors?

AL The feedback is mainly seen in the changes with respect to the type of narrative that museums offer. The fact that they are networked means that best practices are shared, and this helps a lot with improvement. With respect to the feedback from the public, the museum is read as a place of trust for the cultural growth of people. This system aids in disseminating this message, partly due to its extensive territorial coverage.

GC How did you approach the digital design of museum experiences? At the outset of your tenure, you launched a Three-Year Plan for the Digitization and Innovation of Museums. What were its objectives?

AL In general terms, the plan aimed at providing a framework for Italian museums to adopt digital solutions in a broad sense. It was thus intended to improve the capacity of museums to manage heritage, both in terms of protection and conservation, and to stimulate new ways of valorisation (fruition, access). Furthermore, it aimed to improve the capacity of museums in order to offer cultural heritage, in terms of exhibition, narration, and marketing of related services. And, additionally, to foster a contemporary image of museums as open spaces for sharing knowledge and producing culture, which are also attractive to new generations. Lastly, to activate new forms of access and fruition for active inclusion, remembering that fruition is an integral part of the heritage management process. Digital storytelling theory was a topic of great interest to me, how digital forms could change museum storytelling.

Regarding the personal involvement of visitors in the narrative, the theme of gaming was certainly central. There are now many Italian

museums that have a dedicated videogame, but the pioneering *Father and Son* project of the Archaeological Museum of Naples has set the standard. It has already surpassed 3 million downloads in 2021, and has even been successful in China. To finish the game you have to go to Naples and enter the museum. It was great fun to see families dragged from places as far away as Hawaii and New Zealand all the way to Italy to finish the game.

In Italy, the gaming industry has some of the world's top talents, including Fabio Viola and other game designers. There have been other notable experiences, such as the videogame on the Etruscans at Villa Giulia in Rome or the project for the archaeological museum in Taranto. Every year, Lucca hosts a significant event known as LuBeC, where visitors can explore the latest trends in the field. Additionally, Rome hosts a three-day workshop conference at Cinecittà focused on video games, presenting the sector's newest developments. Organized by Giovanna Marinelli, former Culture Councillor of the Municipality of Rome, this event serves as a platform for industry updates.In addition, 2019 saw the launch of the RO.ME – Museum Exhibition in Rome, drawing participation from both major corporations and smaller national companies in the sector to display their projects.

GC What impact do these proposals have compared to existing solutions from tech giants in the sector, like Microsoft or Google? Are many of these proposals developed by Italian companies?

AT Yes, there is a lot made in Italy. Actually, Google Art and Culture does not cover a huge number of museums in Italy. The network of small companies that aspire to be very innovative is very prolific. It's worth noting that in the digital realm, 80 percent of what is created consists of experiments with short lifespans or low-quality content. However, there are also numerous small companies that demonstrate remarkable solidity, innovation, and competitiveness. The two fairs I mentioned earlier are certainly updated in this dynamic field.

GC Museums have historically been institutions of power and influence, but they now face demands from communities to become more open and engage in dialogue about what is relevant in our present context. What technologies and experiences have Italian museums introduced to meet these evolving needs?

AL If we want to focus on proposals from the visitor to the museum, in the guidelines for museum storytelling I worked on an agreement with the Ministry for each school to 'adopt' a designated museum. The plan was for children to visit the museum and share their ideas on how they wanted it to be. Additionally, each museum, besides

being adopted by a school, was required to have a partnering university as a reference point. Unfortunately, I no longer have access to the data as my successor replaced the manager overseeing this project. However, during my tenure, numerous collaborations were established.

Another trend is virtual reality, which I'm not particularly fond of because it diminishes the aspect of shared experience. When you immerse yourself in virtual reality with goggles, it can be entertaining, but it isolates you in an individual experience. Now we are all looking forward to the latest developments emerging from the landing of Artificial Intelligence in museums, which will certainly bring another big change. It will help break down linguistic and cognitive barriers. Some phenomena hint at new scenarios for cultural content with good results thanks to the new frontiers of digital and interdisciplinary education. Among the new scenarios, the role of Google and other platforms knowing the so-called 'sentiment', that is, the automatic identification of users' opinions and comments, should certainly be mentioned. This information is also valuable to derive unexpressed demand, unconscious desires. Among the data that emerged, for instance, is the desire to learn — present and often unconscious — and the search for more exclusive, non-massified experiences.

In 2019, we introduced a platform designed to assess the online reputation of museums. With the increasing influence of social media and review platforms, it has become essential for museums to monitor user feedback and ratings, enhancing their visibility and fostering connections with both current and potential visitors. Developed by the Politecnico di Milano, the platform offered real-time visualization of the level of engagement between museums and the public, as well as visitors' perceptions over specific timeframes. Data were gathered from various social media channels (such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) as well as review platforms like TripAdvisor and Google Maps. The platform covered a sample of 100 Italian museums and cultural sites.

The ICOM Mandate

In Conversation with Michele Lanzingher

Michele Lanzinger was appointed national president of ICOM Italy in December 2022. He has worked with the Museum of Natural Sciences in Trento since 1988. After being Curator of Geology and Palaeontology, he became Director in 1992. He then coordinated the realisation of the new MUSE / Science Museum, which opened in 2013, designed by the Renzo Piano Studio.

GC In December 2022, you were appointed president of ICOM Italy. Let's start with the new definition of the term museum approved by ICOM last August 2022 in Prague: how does it change the perspective on cultural institutions?

ML In the third paragraph, the definition states: "Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums promote diversity and sustainability." This wording means that the museums have to interpret their mission through a double channel: on the one hand, they have to implement good practices in accordance with a society that goes in this direction, thus acting to improve a variety of aspects in the facilities. On the other hand, they must create participation, awareness, and collective knowledge in order to promote a culture of sustainability.

In relation to its territory, the museum is not just an accessory, it has a social dimension. It is not a place *dedicated to something* but *dedicated to someone*. Thus, it is necessary to think of museums not as conservators of past goods but as actors looking to the future, to the need to pay attention to cultural heritage, not for the idealisation ofa past left to itself but to improve society.

GC What is the situation of Italian museums you are confronted with?

ML I do not want to dwell on the issue of funding and lack of funding, because it is almost trite to say that culture is underfunded in Italy. Our action aims in particular at ensuring that schools, public buildings, libraries, and museums are considered key places for sustainability.

GC How many museums are we referring to?

ML The data indicates a total of 5,000 museums. Of these, just under 500 are state museums, encompassing archaeological sites and museal monuments. Additionally, there are numerous civic museums, each representing individual local contexts. The topic of museums in the territory represents a very interesting challenge, especially now that important funding from the PNRR[1] will be poured into many of these towns and villages. The question is whether they will remain small provincial realities with a mere conservation mandate, or whether they will be able to transform themselves into relevant places for their communities. I am thinking, for example, of the relationship with schools: Why can't a local museum become a place of experience for many disciplines for the schools that gravitate around it?

1 PNRR stands for 'Piano Nazionale Ripresa Resilienza.' It constitutes the Italian programme for the management of the 'Next Generation EU' funds introduced by the EU to restore the losses caused by the pandemic and for national economic recovery.

In light of the new definition of a museum, I see an interesting future for our museums. There is great openness towards aspects of social, sustainable development and inclusion. When my colleagues are able to show their usefulness, for example, for the ecological transition, the museum will not be a place that has to be financed but an active player with political value, capable of performing functions that even local administrations will recognise.

GC The civic role of museums is a crucial aspect to consider nowadays. Museums are moving away from their traditional image as elitist institutions and are instead embracing a more inclusive and accessible approach. How are Italian museums addressing this shift? What discussions are taking place within the Italian museum community regarding this matter?

ML ICOM is establishing numerous Working Groups to address specific topics such as inclusion, education, risk management, and professionalization. These are complemented by the work of the Regional Coordination Units with their activities. The two realities will be in close contact to test projects. ICOM experiences the contradiction of of being a voluntary association while harboring ambitious goals for thought leadership and development. This not only demands significant personal commitment but also financial resources. We are endeavoring to diversify our revenue streams by seeking market opportunities such as contracts, research projects, and sponsorships. Our aim is to foster a space for dialogue that extends beyond the confines of traditional ICOM meetings, which typically occur on Thursdays and last only an hour. Using the combined strengths of museums across the country to participate in discussions with Coordination and Research and Development Agencies via our Working Groups shows potential for significant progress in the future.

GC How are these Working Groups structured? Who introduces the topics for discussion?

ML There is Category A, through which we discuss topics we consider important and which are brought to the attention of the Board. For Category B, any member can instead apply and form a Research Group on a topic that he or she considers urgent.

GC Is the idea within ICOM to broaden its scope to reach and involve all museums?

ML Yes, but it should also work the other way around, by generating new ideas. A dedicated division within ICOM could be established, operating under different principles, forging strong partnerships with institutions like universities that can involve doctoral students. For instance, envisioning a meta-museum: ICOM could issue thematic calls for participation to Italian universities, engaging doctoral candidates, possibly with financial backing from bank foundations supporting the project.

There has been a shift from an elitist museum vision to a centrality of the social role. As ICOM, we must move accordingly. We do not give a political slant to our work, but place the focus on providing a service, in making material available to those who work for reflection and in support of good practice.

The editorial component of ICOM should also change: I would like to digitise all the material in order to have a sort of handbook of good practices where you can explore and find the seminars, conferences, and publications that have been made.

GC Returning to the digital aspect: over the past decade, museums have made significant investments in digitizing their collections. However, I observe a lack of profound and enduring comprehension of these processes. Collaborations with companies such as Microsoft and Google often yield standardized packages that present vastly different content in a uniform manner. Is there a shortfall in adopting a humanistic and forward-looking approach to the integration of these tools into museums?

ML I totally agree. Starting with IT companies or funding like PNRR, you can only go through massive digitisation processes. the pathway invariably leads to large-scale digitization endeavors. However, I wouldn't blame on Microsoft or Google; it's our responsibility to harness this potential intelligently. Drawing upon centuries-old traditions of safeguarding and conserving museum artifacts, we should reconsider the narrative ourselves, rather than outsourcing it to Microsoft. It is our job to make the connections.

GC Do you have any interesting examples of projects working to reactivate digitised material?

ML Right now the Italian situation is not simple. The Minister of Culture, Gennaro Sangiuliano, is putting everything on the back burner. A prospect in my opinion against history and against the idea of development. If you block digital accessibility to these heritages, you block spaces of invention, levels of development, of commercial outcomes, of well-being, of employment, of professionals, of local development. A small museum that is given the opportunity to mix its collections with iconographic quotations from famous works creates an inspirational moment that, starting from its small local collection, virtually places it in a cultural landscape.

GC Is ICOM reflecting on these aspects and considering how digital heritage can be activated to provide added value?

ML I haven't formalized it yet, but once we begin working with the groups, there will be one dedicated to digitisation. As MUSE we are currently evaluating whether to participate in a PNRR of massive digitisation of natural history artefacts. We are talking about millions of herbarium sheets. The thought of digitising everything has to do with the logic of documenting and archiving the heritage. It opens up a potential that does not only reach the botanical expert, but offers room for creation and reworking by many other practices, from scientific to historical to artistic.

GC In this sense, science museums represent forerunners in their relationship with new technologies and in their search for interactive solutions to enter into dialogue with the public.

ML We need to assess the usefulness and limitations of these technologies. In recent weeks at MUSE, we've been implementing an assisted visitation system. However, I've noticed that we're approaching this backwards: we've introduced the technologies without first developing the necessary in-house skills. As we construct the storytelling and storyboard for the museum visit, I believe it's crucial to strategically reflect on the type of relationship we want to foster between our visitors and the exhibition space. This reflection needs to encompass various factors, from different visitor personas (such as families with children, young adults, science enthusiasts, self-educating groups, etc.) to diversifying the types of discovery journeys offered, ranging from proactive interaction to audio guides, and from building repeat visit relationships to accommodating one-time visitors.

GC Over the past decade, MUSE has seen a significant increase in visitor numbers, with over four million visits — a key indicator of the impact and success of the museum experience. Could you elaborate on how this project evolved and was implemented during the transformation from a Science Museum to MUSE?

ML I would like to consider two significant factors behind our achievement. The first is certainly the incredible interest of the public. We cannot deny that the first evaluation one makes of the success of a museum is based on the number of people who visit it in a year. From this point of view, the MUSE is an incredible success. I would also like to point out that the MUSE is an entity that produces positive impacts on the territory. We have carried out specific surveys to this end, and we have shown that the museum's activity, in addition to the internal employment dimension, generates a positive impact on the city's businesses of around 50 million euros per year and contributes positively to the number of visitors to the other territorial museums.

There was an intensive process of conceptualizing the museum's significance. For years, we visited and compared experiences abroad, studying how to create a museum that transcends various sensibilities. The driving force, particularly evident since 2015 with the 2030 Agenda, has been sustainability and development. The emphasis on interaction permeates our approach, reflected in the design collaboration with Renzo Piano. The exhibition is characterized by its light and transparent design, with minimal showcases, allowing visitors to closely engage with the material exhibits, fostering both emotional resonance and profound respect. This intimate display approach has proven effective. Additionally, the museum features a permanent laboratory aspect for visitors, with guides stationed in every room wearing 'Ask Me' printed on their t-shirts, facilitating direct interaction with visitors.

GC However, do these initiatives always align with the traditional educational model of the museum? Historically, museums have served an educational role, but there is now a significant shift towards becoming dialogue platforms where visitors are encouraged to contribute their own practices, including digital formats. Museums must adapt to these evolving dynamics. How effectively are they navigating this transition?

ML This is absolutely true. Until twenty years ago, there was the explosion of science communication, of education in the museum, through workshops. It was still a unidirectional process: this river of knowledge reached the archipelago of people. But there was the component of the place of learning, the fascination of discovery still made sense. Today there has been a move towards inclusivity, accessibility, interaction, experientiality. You want to relate what you do and see in the museum to your contribution, co-creation. These are all new challenges that make the relationship with the visitor more complex.

GC The visitor's practice may not have necessarily changed, but rather how it is perceived and embraced by the museum, wouldn't you agree? It's primarily about how the museum adapts to accommodate what visitors bring with them...

ML Yes, currently visitors may not actively demand it; they may discover it instead. However, I hope that in the future visitors will seek out a different kind of relationship with the museum. This

relationship must also be redefined considering the various types of visits. For instance, there's the casual visitor who spends a few hours on a Sunday with their family. The competition for such visitors includes places like Gardaland, ski resorts, beaches, or mountains. These are the alternatives for tourist visitors. On the other hand, there's the educational aspect, where students, over 200,000 annually at MUSE, visit primarily from outside the region. They participate in a museum tour and educational activities before leaving. Additionally, there are ongoing activities that can be developed with local schools, viewing the museum as a place, laboratory, and platform for long-term projects. In these processes, museums don't have to work alone; there are many third-sector and voluntary associations available for collaboration, offering added value. Ultimately, the museum's reason for existence is deeply rooted in the response it receives from visitors.

GC As your term as ICOM president has just begun, what are the key areas you hope to focus on in the coming years?

ML As president, my foremost commitment will be to promote museums as increasingly active and relevant entities within their respective communities, serving as agents of local development with a strong emphasis on sustainability in all its environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. This begins with advocating for the adoption of the new ICOM definition of a museum and supporting the affirmation of the National Museum System.

Additionally, I would like to support initiatives aimed at further qualifying the figure of the museum professional, promoting a dimension of continuous training and facilitating collaborative projects and the exchange of best practices among our members. his endeavor will particularly involve our Regional Coordinations, which play a vital role in fostering ICOM Italy's relationships with local communities, as well as our Thematic Commissions and Working Groups, which serve as our platforms for exploring contemporary museology, supported by our connections with ICOM's International Committees.

From Cultural Attractors to Visitors Activators

In Conversation with Fabio Viola

Fabio Viola is a game designer, curator and lecturer. He founded TuoMuseo in 2014, an international collective of 3D artists, developers and animators working at the intersection of art and video games. He collaborates with many national and international museums to develop digital projects aimed at supporting visitor practice and promoting an activation of audiences in their relationship with museums.

GC How would you describe the contemporary digital landscape in the museum field?

FV Almost all economic investment in the last ten years has been in digitization. Today, 99% of the technological effort is related to transferring something pre-existing into a digital container. However, these processes do not generate active audiences: if I am not interested in visiting a museum, I will not go and see it in a digitized version; if I have no interest in that statue, I will have no interest in its 3D version, and so on.

This is also what happened during the pandemic when a large part of cultural institutions poured content and experiences designed for the physical visit into the digital domain. In this way what we get is a diminution of the original; the physical continues to prevail over the immaterial counterpart we are creating. To counter this effect, it would be important to go beyond mere digitisation. The real challenge lies in creating content that is digitally native, meaning it is newly produced specifically for the digital platform, possibly stemming from existing materials. This shift requires more of an artistic approach than a technological one. It occurs when discussions are no longer solely initiated by the director or curator but are also prompted by users interacting with the content.

GC Could this deadlock be attributed to insufficient investment or a lack of vision?

FV Of vision, undoubtedly. Just think of what happened with the PNRR[1] in Italy, but we can also extend this to the European level: the economic effort is almost exclusively aimed at digitisation.

GC What plans have been implemented to ensure the accessibility of digitized materials? How are they being made searchable and usable? Or do they currently remain largely unused?

FV This is part of the problem. I am not against digitisation a priori, but digitisation cannot even be considered as a starting point; it is a simple step. The advantage offered by digital assets must act as an activator to give the digitised materials a chance to be reworked. From my perspective, this involves moving beyond the existing copyright model, which hinders these processes by restricting the ability to freely modify content.

GC But don't operations like these, exemplified by institutions like the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, imply

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a commodification of art that is entirely decontextualized and commercialized?

FV I disagree. Today, the value of a work of art is given by its circulation, which will create more value to the original. Digitisation from this point of view does not bring any value to the original; it is just a mere copy. Copyright policy is useless from my point of view because it only applies sensibly to a minority of works of art. It makes sense for masterpieces, but we are talking about 0.01.% of the cultural heritage. The remaining 99% need this possibility, so that the work can continue to evolve through the efforts of those who reinterpret it. Examples such as the *Divine Comedy* or *Peter Pan* are still so strong today, centuries later, thanks to reworking. *Peter Pan* has also undergone a reworking in a negative key, the so-called 'Peter Pan syndrome' in psychology, yet this implies that a percentage of those who hear about the Peter Pan syndrome will go and retrieve the original text. Probably the majority will not do so, but there is always a small percentage more who have been activated. This principle applies equally to other materials: both the museum and the artworks themselves gain value in this process. It initiates a divergent activity from that of the museum, enabling numerous creative individuals to use these materials as starting points for their own reinterpretations, which can manifest in various forms such as textures, films, video games, and more. If, on the other hand, the public is forced to deal with an archive that is essentially inaccessible, then that requires payment in advance for viewing and does not allow for a reworking of the materials; creative material is not generated and the works die.

GC In terms of reworkings, the visitor becomes a producer, a co-author. But what is the contemporary situation of institutions with regard to the re-use of cultural heritage? For example, in the last ten years, museums have allowed photography within the halls, but for private use only, not for creative or commercial purposes...

FV Something is changing. We can observe involvement on three levels: that of the spectator, that of the spectator-actor, and more recently, that of the spectator-author. A museum today should aim to support all three of these levels. I'm not suggesting that everyone should become a spectator-author; not everyone is prepared to engage or has the capacity for creative reworking, creation, or pro-creation. However, a museum, like any public or private institution, should strive to cater to those who wish to enjoy it traditionally, those who seek to engage within a predefined artistic framework, and those who wish to contribute their own practice. This applies both in-person and remotely, as one of the necessary changes in the institution's transition from attractor to cultural activator involves rethinking the concept of the visitor. I believe that in

the future, most visitors will not physically enter museums. For now, we are operating on a preliminary level: what is created can circulate, albeit without generating significant value.

GC Are you talking about economic value?

FV That too. I believe it's crucial to involve the role of the producer, who invests effort, energy, and talent in what they create. This individual should have the opportunity to participate in the value chain, including the economic aspect. As has already been happening for example in the gaming world for many years: videogames like Roblox or Minecraft enable the most creative users to sell what they create within their community. The moment the player becomes the owner of that extension of the game, he can decide how to make it accessible to others, whether free of charge, or through an access fee. This is the scenario envisaged by the Content Creation Economy, which is already a reality in other sectors. The museum could present itself as a platform that stimulates cultural production and, consequently, regenerates a new value chain from which it benefits.

Institutions often still believe that the primary source of revenue comes from ticket sales to physical museum visitors. However, most of the gain could be generated from online visitors, providing them with opportunities to unleash their creativity.

GC From your experience, in what terms could one learn from the experience of video games?

FV In general, video games such as Fortnite or Roblox, for example, have evolved to become real platforms that represent extraordinary social spaces. They operate on a peer-to-peer system, fostering new economies and creative models that bridge the gap between physical and digital realms. It has become common practice for international companies to conduct initial product tests, often in the form of video games, within digital spaces. Based on the data obtained, they determine whether to proceed with physical production. Many fashion houses and architecture firms follow a similar approach, testing and refining their concepts online, analyzing consumer interactions and reactions, before moving into physical production.

GC What value can *gamification* have when we talk about inclusion?

FV Gamification is synonymous with involvement and participation. Learning to design experiences *for* and *with* audiences is a fundamental first step towards breaking down barriers and fostering horizontal processes. A new way of designing *for* and *with* people. For example, the Neapolitan version of *Father and Son*—the video game

designed for the MANN, the Archaeological Museum of Naples — was made by students from difficult neighbourhoods who collaborated with linguists to create a useful value for the community.

GC *Father and Son* was one of the very first examples of videogame designed for museums. Developed by your association TuoMuseo in 2017, what feedback has it received?

FV That project I believe represented a break with respect to 'doing' culture in Italy and abroad. Credit must be given to director Paolo Giulierini and the project coordinator, Prof. Ludovico Solima, for daring. The complete creative freedom we were granted in determining the genre of the game, the narrative, and integrating cultural elements, I believe, contributed significantly to its success. In its first three years, the game was downloaded over four million times by a global audience.

GC At the moment it seems that visitors bring their digital practice into museums and institutions try to react and elaborate proposals as a reaction.

FV Yes. Museums are destined to succumb structurally, as we know them. In an age where spatiality does not exist, the museum as a physical space can no longer function as an attraction. Or rather, it can be, but to the extent that it accepts that it is in all those places where its content travels. This means having to completely change the governance model, to understand that the visitor is no longer just the one who physically enters the space. New metrics need to be established: engagement defines the visitor, and physical presence does not necessarily equate to greater involvement. Given the opportunity, remote visitors can also actively participate, make decisions, create, and co-create. Of course, this process begins with content, vision, and research direction provided by the museum.

GC How do you calculate the success of a project?

FV It depends on the objectives one has set oneself. I have worked on many projects and not all of them had the same goal. Some pursued an impact on on-site influx; others had objectives related to the transfer of content; others sought to increase circulation between different locations. Some projects were focused on the preparation before visiting, while others aimed to enhance the on-site experience, and some were geared towards post-visit engagement. Consequently, there isn't a single metric to evaluate success. Generally, I assess the impact on active users: how many actions they took during the experience and how often they engaged by making choices. These metrics are related to pro-activity and imply feedback tied to the rate of return, rather than just the interaction

with the facility. Currently, museums rarely employ this approach, which in itself serves as an indicator.

Museums are typically not designed to continuously generate new content and experiences. However, if they are unable to do so, then the public should have the opportunity to interact with certain aspects of the exhibits or installations. In my opinion, content creation and insights can either come from museum staff at the top, consistently providing new content for engagement, or from the bottom, where members of the public contribute content. An ideal scenario would involve a combination of both approaches.

GC In your practice what tools do you adopt to activate the visitor?

FV Different projects have employed different techniques. For instance, there's a distinction between digital work and installation development, each with its own methods of engagement. Take, for example, the *Play* exhibition at the Reggia di Venaria in 2022, where we implemented a video mapping project in the gardens. What appeared on the 67-meter-long facade evolved in real-time based on how visitors interacted with a 10-meter-long musical keyboard. They could compose imagery that would then be projected onto the facade.

In Alghero, instead, we introduced the *Digital Canvas* installation in 2022. Here, visitors could draw materials that seamlessly integrated into the projected digital environment. Every day, the aquatic life, including small fish and sea creatures, made by the visitors underwent changes. Interaction with the digital world was facilitated through touchscreen interaction. Children returned each day to witness the evolving scene, breathing life into the installation without the need for new content creation.

GC In all of these instances, however, are the choices made by the spectator simply selecting from a predetermined set of options?

FV In Alghero, the visitor was free to draw. Of course, we gave a thematic framework to have artistic coherence. Our work there is that of activators, not of creators or artists. In this new regime of spectatorship and show-authorship, there is no longer the creator, but the activator. It depends on how far one wants to go: if one wants to maintain qualitative control, one needs more authoritativeness; if, on the other hand, interest shifts to the axis of process, one favours a generative practice.

GC Probably the second scenario opens up more to the potential of having spectator-authors: the moment one allows freedom by negotiating control, at the same time one opens up to the unexpected and the new. Do you agree?

FV Of course. Then it is always the context that makes the difference. And here again a big question opens up about copyright. If I go and crystallise what I see at that moment, I did not create it.

GC You had, for example, supported the practice of the Marini Museum in Florence and coordinated the Playable Museum Award...

FV In that case it was a competition, where participants were asked to imagine the museum of the future. Not the Marino Marini as such, but an idea of a museum. Usually similar initiatives become self-referential; the choice of the Marini in this sense was already a change of perspective. Moreover, in almost all calls and contests, the ownership of the idea, when financed or even simply submitted, passes to the institution. In this case, on the other hand, the funded projects also remained in the ownership of the intellectual property. An interesting aspect of the Marini project is the more general idea that the museum can become a centre of cultural production. Why can't museums today also be places where art is produced? Museums continue to employ archivists, art historians, archaeologists, but a viable challenge would be their transformation into large co-working hubs, to attract different professionals to work there. Museums are already fostering start-ups focused on cultural heritage or investing in related sectors. By embracing this approach, museums can evolve into centers of cultural production. However, this shift requires deliberate choices in this direction. While these initiatives can generate cultural impacts, they also hold the potential for economic benefits. For instance, if a museum incubates a promising start-up, it stands to gain partially from its success.

GC What prevent people from accessing cultural venues, and how can we address them?

FV Today, cultural institutions should look to *Fornite* and *Netflix* as models and rivals in their ability to reach, engage, retain and transmit information to their audiences. A museum's rival is not another museum, but the entire everyday entertainment options. As long as we do not pause to understand why audiences *under 35* tend to desert cultural venues but invest hours (and money) in *Minecraft,* Netflix, Instagram, Spotify, we will continue to think about micro-policies of improvement and not about macro-scenarios.

I'm not proposing that cultural venues become entertainment companies. Rather, I'm questioning whether it's acceptable for them to be spaces where we not only preserve culture but also actively contribute to its creation. I believe this is essential, as it breaks down barriers based on time periods and media formats. Projects such as *ZKM* in Karlsruhe or *Oodi* in Helsinki or the Teamlab Digital Museum help us to understand how it is possible to do research, preservation, and creation by attracting audiences, entering into their lives, broadening the range of stakeholders and, at the same time, keeping an eye on economic sustainability.

GC How will the museum survive the challenges of the present?

FV I think museums still have great value, even more so in a society that has no reference points. Museums have a moral authority, a level of trust that is widely acknowledged. From my point of view, there are many aspects that should be focused on to overcome the challenges of the present: creativity, contamination, involvement. The museum in particular should be increasingly collective. On the one hand, governing the complexity of the 21st century requires numerous, even divergent professional figures. On the other, a return to the idea of a collective fruition — in *gaming* we would say *multiplayer* — of the artistic product, which in this new framework becomes a process.

The public plays a role in shaping cultural spaces, and we should enable them to leave tangible and intangible marks that enrich the historical significance of preserved artifacts. Those who understand the importance of accommodating diverse contributions, whether in artistic creation or conservation, will succeed in meeting future challenges. We need a shift from the idea of culture produced by the few and consumed by the many, to one produced by the many for the many.

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Morphosis

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Art Club Presentation, June 2021. At the event, participants were invited to collectively map out needs and proposals regarding Museion's mandate. © Museion, Fanni Fazekas

Fig. 2–3. (p. 137)
The Sun's Origin, May 5, 2023. On the occasion of the opening of the *Me, We* exhibition by Japanese artist Shimabuku, the Public Program group has organized an underground electronic music evening with Japanese artists DJ Sodeyama and Anri. © Museion, Rosario Multari, Asia De Lorenzi

Fig. 4. (p. 138)
Spoken Word Poetry, September 16-20, 2022. Part of the Museion Factory program, the participatory residency with British artist Otis Mensah explored language as a tool to address identity, existence, and coming of age. Participants collectively created a new piece of spoken word poetry, performed during the public final event. © Museion

Fig. 5. (p. 139)
Teatro de Los Sentidos, November 4-8, 2022. Gabriel Hernandez Ladino, from the experimental Spanish theater company Teatro de Los Sentidos, led a workshop to explore the diverse expressive possibilities of body and language through sensory and playful interactions.

Fig. 6. (p. 139)
Werk: The Intro Ball: Everyone's a 10!, October 28, 2023. Final event of the vogueing workshop with New York artist William Briscoe. The event was organized in collaboration with the LGBT association Centaurus, Bolzano. © Museion

Fig. 7. (p. 141) *Fig.7. Worlding with the Molecular,* November 19, 2022. This biohacking workshop, led by artist, researcher, and activist Mary Maggic, focused on the extraction of hormones from urine. As part of the performative symposium *Opening the Pill*, the workshop provided a practical experience and an opportunity for reflection on alternative practices and perspectives of emancipation.

Fig. 8-9. (p. 142) *Longing For Belonging*. Three dates in November 2023 dedicated to exploring the concept of belonging — whether to a body, a place, or a community. The events featured a range of formats including film screenings, collective readings, and performances. Above and in the center: A temporary seating system designed by Parasite 2.0. to engage audiences with the space during the events.

Fig. 10. (p. 142) *La Casa*, November 24, 2023, a participatory long performance curated by Spanish artist Aitana Cordero.

Fig. 11-12. (p. 143) *depositary.art* is a digital platform to expand the exchange with Art Club audiences. Like a kaleidoscope of unordered materials, and shared observations, the platform invites visitors to freely create loose associations, and new links across disciplines. Presented during the *forget_me_not* event in April 2023, it was developed with Studio Moniker, Amsterdam. © Museion, Samira Mosca

Fig. 13–14. (p. 152) The first diagram represents the original structure of Art Club as it was practically implemented during the first year and a half of activities. The second diagram illustrates the new structure of Art Club following the revision of the model negotiated with the museum and presented in spring 2024.

Fig. 15. (p. 154)
Town Hall Meeting, April 11, 2024. Through an open call, Art Club members invited those interested in becoming part of the initiative to join and share their questions and ideas. © Museion, Samira Mosca

Fig. 16-17. (p. 155)
Fig.16-17. During the *Town Hall Meeting*, with the assistance of guest artist Callum Bowden, participants were involved in a Live Action Role-Playing (Larp) session. The activity, a simulation of the Art Club experience, enabled participants to directly engage with the commitment of membership. © Museion, Samira Mosca

In Search of New Structures: Negotiating Design Practices Towards a Participatory Museum
Giulia Cordin

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Artistic Research Department,
University of Art and Design Linz
Linz, Austria

Supervisors:
Prof. Dr. Amalia Barboza
Prof. Dr. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen
Prof. Eva Leitolf

Typefaces
Seagal, Giovanni Murolo
Hal Timezone, Studio HanLi

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Ryan Licata

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Giulia Cordin

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