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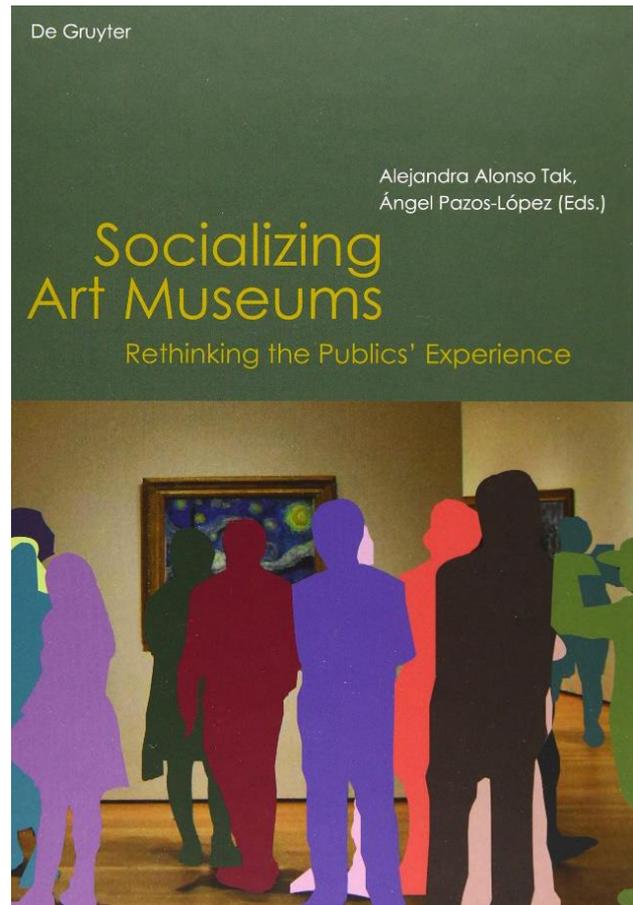
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Alonso Tak, Alejandra and Ángel Pazos-López, eds. *Socializing Art Museums. Rethinking the Public's Experience*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020 [ISBN 978-3-11-064632-0]

Socializing Art Museums. Rethinking the Public's Experience, directed by Alejandra Alonso Tak and Ángel Pazos-López, proposes to us an expansive overview of the museum figure, particularly questioning its education strategies, its relationship with its publics and consequently, its status in a forever evolving world.

One of the main advantages of the museums as an institution has always been their capacity of plasticity, that is to say, their ability to have adapted and still do to political, economic, and social changes, thus acting as major witnesses of History. The 21st century attests to the increasingly active role of art museums amid the rise of social, educational, inclusive, and innovative consciousness and action in cultural institutions, as stated in the introduction. The current Icom definition of 2007 points out the Service for Society and its development as a core task of museum-work. Moreover, the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, established by the United Nations in 2006, underlined the right of all audiences, and particularly those who are prevented from, to access Culture. Facing this context of both directives from international institutions and the clear societal call for a pro-active museum, the development of cultural politics has to take its part in reacting to social needs in times of uncertainties and provide responses to society.

The explicitly mentioned aim of this publication is to be a relevant academic tool that offers different studies from a transversal prism, looking to divulge some of the international initiatives and solutions sought in recent years. Therefore, bringing together some thirty authors from a broad variety of fields, give the benefit of an interdisciplinary and international outlook. From Art History, Philosophy, Sociology, and Gender studies to Architecture, Cultural Management, and Tourism, it counts on the contribution of numerous academics and researchers, mostly Spanish but also Swiss, Canadian, Scottish, Portuguese, and professionals from the cultural sector (French Ministry of Culture, cultural heritage consultant, museum educators, interior designers, Icom representatives, art therapists, etc.). This wide selection of contributors allows us to put these different issues into perspective: how are museums' professionals answering this need for a more social approach from the museum towards the visitor? Have we achieved to understand Universal Accessibility? Should we redefine the museum's mission? And ultimately, what do audiences seek in their experience with museums?



Initiating a reflection on the attitude of museums towards their audiences implies first of all getting to know them, their characteristics, and their expectations. This has been the assignment of Visitors Studies for almost a century. Through various government observatories (Permanent Laboratory of Museum Audiences in Spain, Permanent Observatory of Publics in France, Museum Evaluation Program in the United States, or Observatory of Museums in Quebec), defining the profiles of museum visitors is a key factor to support strategic decisions to adapt the museum to its publics. Visitor Studies highlight above all the sociography of the public potentially excluded from museums, such as young people but also the over-65s and retired, those seeking employment, foreign residents of the country, citizens with low educational level, people with disabilities and social specific needs, etc., as listed in the article of Eloísa Pérez Santos. Al-

though museums do not seem to be perceived as elitist places, these impeded audiences may associate them with a lack of symbolic accessibility that leads them to think that there are no spaces for them. These conclusions are supported by the research of Luis Walias Riviera with his approach of marketing analysis of the expectations of the public. He states that the success of cultural institutions relies on their capacity to acknowledge those expectations and to work around it to evolve creatively and provide new proposals. Taking the example of the opening of the Centro Bótin (Santander, Spain), he insists on the fact that the community has made the museum “something absolutely of their own, to the point of literally forming part of it”. This leads to one of the most important evolutions to be taken into consideration: the shifting perception of the public’s involvement in the museum. The New Museology studies, among others, defend an active role of audiences within cultural structures. This perspective of cultural democracy applied to these institutions advocates converting them into accessible organizations where the participation of society is fostered.

Based on this premise, however, it is pointed out that museums are still sometimes reluctant to consider the results of these studies and maintain a “paternalistic” attitude towards museum audiences, creating a dynamic in which museums professionals try to figure out how to make their collections accessible instead of asking directly to stakeholders. Although, this publication introduces us to a series of initiatives that have been implemented to bridge this gap and to bring about a real engagement of audiences, especially those who are prevented from attending, in the production of a new museum language and content. In these projects, the relationship to art is explored through new approaches that are more performative than theoretical. The article of Ángel Pazos-López and Alejandra Alonso Tak recounts the objectives of the MUSACCES Consortium to invite the visual impaired, heard-hearing, or incarcerated people to participate in the Prado Museum’s activity. They make it clear that the ultimate aim was not for those people to learn new data about artworks, but rather to help perceive the sensations of the paintings and to observe how human perceptions activate through visual aesthetics cue or other senses. Another important step has been taken with the workshops reported by Marta Pucciarelli, Luca Morici, and Jean-Pierre Candeloro in Southern Switzerland and by María Victoria Martín Cilleros and Miguel Elias Sánchez-Sánchez in the Fundación Venancio Blanco (Salamanca, Spain). These two initiatives, the first one aimed at the blind and visual impaired of the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland and initiated by the Laboratory of Visual Culture (University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland), and the second one at young people with Asperger syndrome, have focused on a co-production challenge with their public. By placing them in the position of culture makers, it was a matter of experimenting with new techniques of narrative, to produce content specifically tailored to allow artwork accessibility and enjoyment and, ultimately to forge a direct link with Art through a methodology designed by its own users.

These new relations to Art also implies a shift in the way of conceiving the museum’s educational activity, moving from an “informative museology” to a “performative” one. In museums above all educational contexts, it is imperative that learning be based on experience and appropriation. A fine illustration of the application of this paradigm is the case of the *Museum At Home* program, promoted by the Museum of Ixelles (Belgium) and presented by Stéphanie Masuy. Taking benefit of the museum’s closure for renovation, the opportunity was taken to experiment with a new type of *extra muros* exhibition, to keep on exhibiting the collections but mainly to maintain and even reinforce the engagement with the local audience. Twice a year, the museum has been inviting ten residents from the neighborhood to host a work of art from its collection in their own home for a weekend. First being restricted to the residents’ own social circle on Saturdays, on Sundays, residents open up their home to the general population and are encouraged to experiment with art mediation to propose to their public. Turning your domestic space into an intimate micro museum is an exceptional experience associated with a sense of privilege and commitment. The museum is no longer just an institution hermetic and distant but is also now perceived as a common resource of a whole community. As aptly cited, Susan Goldman stated that “inclusive design doesn’t mean you are designing one thing for all people. You are designing a diversity of ways to participate so that everyone has a sense of belonging.”. From now on, it’s more a matter of “working with” than “making for”.

As previously noted, the visitor has historically been regarded as a passive recipient of knowledge as opposed to a learning and productive agent of the culture. The denial of an actor’s stance was supported by the very way in which the museum conceptualized its rendering of History. As stated by Marián López Fernández Cao and Hans-Martin Hinz in their respective articles, History was mostly presented as a positive one-dimensional narrative. The dialogue was indeed largely absent because the purpose was not to evoke conflicting historical situations, but rather to provide a designated group with the necessary education about their heritage. The national museums were formed at a time of social, economic, and political turmoil, and their role was to stabilize identities among people and bring cohesion of the Nation around a collective and shared History. However, just as the people were eager to reappropriate the common good of the Nation, which Art is, the new museums, starting in the 1970s and 1980s, have had to present multi-perspective views of Culture and History. The audience was put into the position to make up their own minds because they were introduced to the fact that History is always the sum of perspectives and not a sole and static discourse.

As a result of this prism shift, this period also tended to include the claims of the activists of its time in its self-reflection on the content and shape of its museum proposals. The “Authorized Heritage Discourse” (Laurajane Smith) has begun to integrate the recognition of discriminatory policies within museums. Carolina Peral Jiménez raises the issue of the exhibition of symbolic

violence against women in Art. By exhibiting works that feature passive, usually nude, objectified women, and obscuring the contribution made by women to society and art, museums help transmit this cultural violence by perpetuating gender roles and stereotypes. Even in the current cultural landscape, the number of women who are considered great contemporary artists is still small compared to that of men, and high ranking jobs within the cultural sphere continue to fall into male hands.

Faced with these insights, museums would be expected to provoke a reversal of values. However, as Alice Semedo points out museums remain the most trusted knowledge-legitimizing institutions in society today because they are indeed seen as neutral: “they are expected to stay neutral politically, unbiased and factual”. However, we have seen that the urge for a museum more socially committed to its community is becoming more and more widespread and is turning into a requirement if the museum wishes to preserve its privileged position as a reference institution. The figure of the museum is thus caught in this in-between where the public demands that it assumes its accountability as an organization that must be a representative of society but with the key feature that it remains impartial. Art museums are perceived as embodiments of State authority, and by extension, of the status quo. This is what Martyna Ewa Majewska recalls when she talks about incentives of actions of Art vandalism. It is a way for the public to claim power over the institution and to express their protest: “they do so because they deem the art museum to be part of the commons, demanding museums to be reflective of and responsible to the society at large rather than a selected group of privileged individuals”. Beyond the recurring accusations of sexism and racism against museum policies, the public also tends to confront them about their funding ethics, often linked to the world of politics and finance and sometimes led by personalities deemed problematic.

As early as 1971, Duncan F. Cameron, then director of the Brooklyn Museum, urged the museum world in his lecture to address the dichotomy between the museum-temple and the museum-forum. The museum had then been for far too long an untouchable and sacred place, dispensing a transcendental Truth. By advocating the museum as a forum, Cameron wanted to stress the need for a publicly available arena that fosters dialogue, “a demand for an institution that listens as opposed to

solely speaking in an authoritative voice”, as outlined by Majewska. Their accountability has to be devoted to the 99%, the local communities, the silenced voices, the impeded audiences. It should now, and in the future, be open to a greater diversity of views, opinions, origins, audiences, and covered topics. It is up to museum education to offer a challenging narrative facing the dominant one and to provide a productive space for resistance, struggle, and recognition. Through working on imagining and creating alternative spaces, critical museum education enables the unveiling of alternatives and possibilities to contest dominant representations and hegemonic discourse. By taking advantage of its status as a sacred area, the museum has the power to legitimize previously silenced or ignored discourses by sharing its symbolic power of acknowledgment and authority. In its continuous adaptation, the museum must strive to become a space of mediation, if not a mediator itself, a place of threshold where debates can take place and where society can express and reflect on itself. The museum must serve as a tool, a pretext for its actors, both professionals and individuals so that they can deploy their agency, create and take hold of their culture.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that this book lays a solid foundation on the concept of Universal Accessibility by taking into account not only physical and cognitive but also social barriers. Permitting the active participation of a broad and diverse public and acknowledging their revendications tends to socialize museums at their very heart and break cultural, economic, formative, religious, generational, or any type of obstacle. This goes even beyond this acception by incorporating a radical reflection on the asserted identity of the museum and its functions towards society. A final semantic contribution will summarize the whole of this broad reflection. As the directors of this publication have pointed out, it is a matter of transitioning from an “inclusive museology” to a “culture integration” because integration embodies a sense of natural interaction whilst inclusion may give the idea of an inserted and foreign element. The museum must integrate the Other, not merely include them.

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