

Towards a Museum of Mutuality

Editorial

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Engendering integration while acknowledging differences is one of the biggest challenges facing museums globally today. Institutions must reconceptualize the relationship between their collections and the engagement with (new and diverse) audiences at all levels. In response, there has been a shift in the museum model, both theoretically and on the level of institutional arrangements, from the museum as a site of authority to the post-museum as a site of mutuality.¹

The act of curating at its most basic is about connecting different concepts and cultures, and bringing their elements into proximity with each other in order to create innovative ways of seeing that counter social injustice and promote equity on all possible levels. Beyond the museum as “contact zone,”² and following Terry Smith, the curatorial turn is interested in exploring new contexts and relationships, and working with an artifact’s ability to reveal hidden knowledge.³ Museums have become spaces for knowledge creation as well as agents of social regeneration and vehicles of broad social change.⁴

Similarly, feminist and postcolonial researchers and museum practitioners seek to decentralize the universal,

Western epistemological logic as only one way of seeing things. The striking concordance between these two fields speaks to the need for setting up knowledge networks that bridge different epistemologies, iconographies, and vocabularies.⁵ These diasporic networks by implication also affect museums everywhere when it comes to issues of representation, inclusion, and exclusion.

Some of these networks start from a more practice-based perspective, such as *STUDIO i, Platform for inclusive culture*, launched in 2017 by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.⁶ Others, like the Museum of Equality and Difference (MOED), deploy online media and critical theory in order to experiment and stimulate the radical innovation of the museum field.⁷ It is in the context of these networks that this issue of *Stedelijk Studies* was initiated. The issue aims to frame and interconnect the current movements and initiatives in both the museum and academic worlds towards making museums spaces of mutuality, and to stimulate academic research on their impact and learnings.

In the selected essays we encounter two main lines of inquiry; one is directed towards the various roles given to or taken by audiences, while the other concentrates on the impact of postcolonial thought and the global environment on institutional collaborations.

The Museum of Mutuality: Opening Up to a Plurality of Voices

Debates around the place of the audience and the social role of the museum have emerged since the advent of new museology.⁸ More recently, sponsors and policy makers have demanded that museums become radically shared public spaces and that they play an important role in social cohesion through increased accessibility and public participation.⁹ However, it is only relatively recently that museums around the world have begun to recognize the powerful role of displays and exhibitions in the process of lifelong learning and transnational identity constitution.¹⁰ Museums have the potential, as Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo explain, to be “conceived of as sites of struggle, of cultural contestation and renewal.”¹¹ Acknowledging that objects tell different stories to different audiences—some of which may be contradictory and in need of serious contestation—and that these differences need to be excavated through innovative curatorial and educational practices, raises important questions that must be addressed at the global level. How are institutions negotiating issues of public agency and empowerment? How is this new imperative of exposing multiple voices and representation impacting exhibition culture(s) and the position of the expert in museums?

In the opening article of this issue, “Understanding Audience Participation Through Positionality: Agency, Authority, and Urgency” museum professionals and researchers Lorna Cruickshanks and Merel van der Vaart draw upon their experience involving audiences (as a curator and as a community engagement professional) with science, history, ethnographic, and social history collections. They define the concepts of agency, authority, and urgency in the context of collections-based participation and explore the impact of positionality on multifarious forms of museum participation. Their thought-provoking article aims to stimulate reflective practice among museum professionals and awareness of power dynamics within institutions, to move closer to the democratic ideals of the museum of mutuality.

The second contribution of this issue is a reprinted version of the essay “Changing the Game: Museum Research and the Politics of Inclusivity” by Margriet Schavemaker.¹² In this piece, Schavemaker describes how over the past two decades museums have incorporated the so-called “discursive turn” and have become a safe place for unsafe discussions. However, one might also argue that these practices ultimately remained somewhat unchallenging and homogenous. Based on her research projects and curatorial practices in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Schavemaker discusses what a more radical and (self-)critical opening up of the museum entails. She makes a plea for radically stepping aside and opening up to other voices in order to make institutions agents of change, and thus prove themselves not to be an immutable tool simply working to maintain and reproduce hegemony. However, one of the most probing challenges that remains unsolved for these (semi-) public institutions is how to radically open up for all and yet also be a safe space where the repressed and counter-voices can speak up, challenge, and change the institutions from within.

Elisavet Kalpaxi’s article draws a parallel between photography and museums in order to discuss museum practices aiming at diversity and inclusion as well as institutional and discursive restructuring that allows for greater public engagement and participation. Photography and museums, Kalpaxi argues, have had an immense influence on each other. Without effacing their differences, the article examines what has been common in the political role that photography and museums have played in shaping cultural representation. This enables a better understanding of museums’ processes of interpretation and dissemination of ideological messages, the reconceptualization of their collections, and their practices of knowledge production and communication, as well as their relationship to the social margins and the role of their audiences.

This first section, with its central focus on audiences, is closed by Pat Villeneuve. In her contribution, Villeneuve aims to address the slow-paced change, what she calls “a stalled paradigmatic shift,” towards very much needed visitor-centered practices in art museums. She invites us to

think about how Western museums have developed in recent decades, and how we can still achieve a museum of mutuality by shifting curatorial habitual practices and fostering awareness among museum professionals. She offers a new theoretical model for art museum curation based on a competing values framework. It is an experimental tool intended to help art museums reflect upon their curatorial practices and understand that (explicit or implicit) decisions made throughout the curatorial process determine in great measure who attends exhibitions.

Postcolonial and Global Mutuality: Institutional Collaborations

It is increasingly becoming clear that, when striving for mutuality, we need to take into account that museum collections are the result of purposeful activities, which are informed by ideas about what is significant and what is not. Museums choose who will be represented, how, and which dominant narrative will be displayed.¹³ Postcolonial feminist critics and activists have been contesting the museum authority in relation to the absence of the work of female and non-white artists,¹⁴ the dominance of the presentation of the white male gaze as universal,¹⁵ the ways in which museums have been instrumental in building hegemonic and dichotomous colonial collections,¹⁶ the public representation, and the museum's role as agent of social regeneration and vehicle of broad social change.¹⁷ A number of questions are discussed within this school of thought. For instance, in our contemporary global world, what kinds of citizens are museums creating? How can nationalism and cosmopolitanism be brought together under museum roofs in different cities and nations around the globe? Who has the power to see? Who represents, and who is represented in museums?

In "Decolonial Aesthetics and the Museum," Rosa Wevers interviews decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez on the urgent challenges that Dutch museums face today. Vázquez analyzes the museum as an expression of the modern/colonial order, and through this framework he discusses how museums function as a tool of exclusion. Museums hold both epistemic and aesthetic power, not only over canons but also over different ways of experiencing the world, which is reflected in the way in which museums produce a certain form of spectatorship. Vázquez calls for the need of a "humbling of modernity," and argues that museums need to actively recognize their own positionality and enter into the clarity of what they are in relation to colonial difference.

Luuk Vulkers turns our attention to the recently redefined curatorial practice and modes of display at Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum in "Temporality and Universalism in the Contemporary Ethnographic Museum: Two Collection Presentations at the Tropenmuseum." In the past few years the Tropenmuseum has been engaged in the complex

process of explicitly confronting its own past as a colonial institution and reinventing itself as an inclusive space about “stories of people from all over the world” that create a sense of togetherness. Vulkers locates the museum’s new mission within current discourses about the changing role of museums in a globalized, postcolonial present and investigates the actual results of these discourses in the way two of the museum’s exhibitions display its collection of objects.

In “Dancing at the Museum: Parataxis and the Politics of Proximity in Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s ‘APESHIT,’” [Liedeke Plate](#) conceptualizes the museum as a contact zone. Contact zones, according to Mary Louise Pratt, are social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths. While focusing on the music video “APESHIT” (2018), this article seeks to understand how dancing affects the social space of the museum and what kind of knowledge dancing at the museum produces. Filmed at the French national Musée du Louvre and released to promote the new album of singer Beyoncé and her husband, rapper Jay-Z, the music video produces the art museum as a contact zone by bringing black dancers and singers into its space and staging relations between the performers and some of its iconic pieces.

“Towards Mutuality in International Museum Cooperation: Reflections on a Swiss-Ugandan Cooperative Museum Project,” by [Thomas Laely](#), [Marc Meyer](#), [Amon Mugume](#), and [Rapaël Schwere](#), presents an auto-ethnographic, self-reflexive and critical analysis of mutuality in international museum corporation. The authors focus on “Drink Deeply/Points of View,” a research and exhibition project that was organized in a collaboration between the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich and the Uganda Museum in Kampala. Through this specific case study, the authors approach the notion of “mutuality” both as an ideal and as a *modus operandi*. This dual approach to mutuality provides concrete insights in the potential and fragility of working with this ideal in practice, such as how to deal with unconscious bias of historically rooted and culturally engrained prejudices and hierarchies, and addresses the broader question of whether and how museum cooperation can lead to the reinvention of museums as institutions of mutuality.

This issue concludes with the contribution by [Anne Ruygt](#), who, departing from her own curatorial practice, revisits the notion that photography is the result of “encounters” rather than the work of an individual artist, to offer us an overview of contemporary collaborative photographic projects from the Dutch context which reexamine the power relationship between (Western) documentary photographer and (“non-Western”) subject. These projects are *Ebifananyi* (2014–2018) by Andrea Stultiens and Rumanzi Canon Griffin; *My Maasai* (2017) by Jan Hoek, Sarah Waiswa, Joel Lukhovi,

and Mohammed Althoum; *The Anarchist Citizenship* (2017–ongoing) by Nadine Stijns and Amal Alhaag; and *Welkom Today* (1990–1991/2004/2016–2019) by Ad van Denderen and Lebohang Tlali. They help establish a tradition of polyphonic photographic practice that brings the vernacular in documentary photography and practice postcolonial critique by way of countering the figure of the “author” and its singular Western (male) perspective with multiple insider perspectives from African communities.

Museums are increasingly realizing the urgency to reflect upon their role in the constitution of local, national, and global identities and common histories, and the concomitant processes of inclusion and exclusion. The legacy of modernity, with its notion of the artist as an “autonomous genius,” and a sense of universal values of quality and taste, still haunts museums. The recent article by Mike Murawski, “Interrupting White Dominant Culture in Museums,” which he wrote “as part of a rapidly expanding group of museum workers, leaders, and advocates for change who see the language of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility spread like wildfire *on the surface* of museums without necessarily seeing the deep institutional transformations that are needed *within* museums,” forcefully shows that the field is concerned with and looking for strategies to deeply change the established museum culture and norms.¹⁸ Within this issue of *Stedelijk Studies*, authors with academic as well as professional backgrounds critically question these aspects of the museum and examine strategies and practices that can equip museums further with the tools to become spaces where different tastes, views, and iconographies meet—spaces that can become agents of social change, museums of mutuality.

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Rosemarie Buikema is professor of Art, Culture, and Diversity at Utrecht University. She chairs the UU Graduate Gender Program (GGeP) and is the scientific director of the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies (NOG). Next to this she co-chairs the UU IOS Hub Gender and Diversity: Building an Inclusive Society, is the initiator and project leader of the Museum of Equality and Difference (MOED), and co-curated the exhibition *MOED: What is Left Unseen* at Centraal Museum Utrecht. She has widely published on the intersections of politics and the arts from a variety of postcolonial and feminist perspectives. An updated

version of her latest monograph, *Revoltes in de Cultuurkritiek* (2017), will be published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2020.

Margriet Schavemaker is currently working as Artistic Director of the Amsterdam Museum and as Professor of Media and Art in Museum Practice at the University of Amsterdam (a chair in collaboration with the Amsterdam Museum). Schavemaker writes about contemporary art and theory and organizes discursive events. From 2009 to 2019 she worked at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in various roles (Head of Collections and Research, Manager of Education, Interpretation, and Publications, and curator). Her exhibitions include *The Stedelijk Museum & The Second World War* (2015), *ZERO: Let Us Explore the Stars* (2015), *Jean Tinguely: Machine Spectacle* (2016), *Pinball Wizard – The Work and Life of Jacqueline de Jong* (2019), and the permanent collection presentation *STEDELIJK BASE* (in collaboration with Beatrix Ruf and AMO/Rem Koolhaas and Federico Martelli, 2017–2022).

Emilie Sitzia holds a special chair as professor at the University of Amsterdam and is an associate professor Cultural Education in the department of Art and Literature at the University of Maastricht. She is the director of the Arts and Heritage master's program at UM. She specializes in the impact of art on audiences and word/image interdisciplinary studies. Recent relevant publications include: "Knowledge Production in Art Museums" in *Muséologies* (2018); "The Ignorant Art Museum: Beyond Meaning-making" in *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2017); "Narrative Theories and Learning in Contemporary Art Museums: A Theoretical Exploration" in *Stedelijk Studies* (2016); and the co-authored chapter "Defining Participation: Practices in the Dutch Art World" in Kayte McSweeney and Jen Kavanagh (eds.), *Museum Participation: New Directions for Audience Collaboration* (2016).

Rosa Wevers is the project coordinator of the Museum of Equality and Difference (MOED), and was involved with the curation of the exhibition *MOED: What is Left Unseen* at Centraal Museum Utrecht (2019). Wevers also works as a junior teacher in Gender Studies and is engaged with the coordination of the Gender and Diversity Hub at Utrecht University. Wevers graduated from the research master Gender & Ethnicity at Utrecht University. In September 2019, she will start her NWO-funded PhD project "Opening up the Black Box: Artistic Explorations of Technological Surveillance" at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on artistic engagement with surveillance technologies, and explores the political potential of the arts and questions on the politics of representation.

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