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Museums Change Lives. The Role of Museums in the Creation of the Democratic Public Sphere

My aim is to present the museum as an element of the public sphere as well as to present its opportunities and limitations in generating a public debate concerning migration. The problem of migration and multiculturalism is so important in the current social context that, despite its difficult political connotations, it cannot be omitted by museums, especially if we consider museums as an element of a public sphere.

The concept of New Museology became a symbol of challenges which contemporary museums are facing. Adopting assumptions of the New Museology in the practice of museums is a visible marker of a public character of museums and it does not let them distance themselves from the politics. Museums are understood as public institutions which can include democratic principles and relations in their actions. In my opinion the museum can assure the space for inclusive forms of citizens' activity, and the sheer co-participation in cultural practices supports democratic ideas. Museums have plenty of tools supporting the development of a dialogue between cultures, cultural and social integration, creating the atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding of different worldviews. Such actions can be an effective tool in the fight with the exclusion of certain communities from the possibility of taking part in benefits and resources offered by the society – in the cultural, economic, social and political dimensions. In this article I explore how everyday activity of the museum can support the civic culture in six different dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, space, practices and identity.

Keywords: civic culture, democratic system, New Museology, migration, museum, public sphere

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“Museums Change Lives” is a campaign carried out by the Museums Association². Its aim is to show that everyday practices of museums have a positive social influence and can support the democratic public sphere. One of the examples used in the campaign is the activity of the Cardiff Story Museum, which co-operates with Syrian refugees. As it is said by the employees of the museum, their task is to create a friendly atmosphere and a space in which new members of the community should feel as they were its part³. At the same time, the museum asserts the inalienable right of each individual to be a visible part of the world⁴. My aim is to present the museum as an element of the public sphere as well as to present its opportunities and limitations in generating a public debate concerning migration.

In countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia and Brazil, the problem of migration has been the subject of interest of researchers and practitioners of culture for many decades. This interest hit a high point in the 1990s when several museums of migration were opened: the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York (USA, 1990), the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (USA, 1994), the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (Australia, 1998), Memorial do Imigrante in São Paulo (Brazil, 1998), Pier 21 in Halifax (Canada, 1999). Meanwhile, a growing interest in the phenomenon of migration has been visible in Europe. Since 2000, many museums of this kind have opened up: Immigration History Museum of Catalonia (Spain, 2004), German Emigration Center (Germany, 2005), the museum of the Fondazione Paolo Cresci in Lucca (Italy, 2005), the Museo Narrante della Sila (Italy, 2005), the Cité Nationale d’Histoire de l’Immigration (France, 2007), the Emigration Museum BallinStadt Hamburg (Germany, 2007), the Museo Nazionale dell’Emigrazione Italiana (Italy, 2009), The Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp (Belgium, 2013), the Emigration Museum in Gdynia (Poland, 2014)⁵. Moreover, many museums whose activity is not strictly dedicated to the problem of migration take into consideration the problem of cultural diversity, identity and intercultural dialogue and include it in their everyday practices (temporary exhibitions, educational programmes and the collection building policy). The issue of migration and multiculturalism is so important in the current social context that, despite its difficult political connotations, it cannot be omitted by museums, especially if we consider museums as an element of the public sphere. The contemporary museum,

² Museum Change Lives, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives> [Accessed: 13.01.2017].

³ Museum Change Lives: Making Cardiff A Home, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT7rGjBEDck&list=PLYOHZtySwPKS_sIDSSaCZ2HXD3J6vxbVq&index=3 [Accessed: 13.01.2017].

⁴ L.B. Peressut, C. Pozzi (2012), Introduction, in: Peressut L.B., Pozzi C. (eds.), *Museums in an age of migrations. Questions, Challenges, Perspectives*, Milano: Politecnico di Milano, p. 11.

⁵ A.C. Cimoli (2013), Migration Museums in Europe. Narratives and their Visual Translations, in: Peressut L.B., Lanz F., Postiglione G. (eds), *European Museums in the 21st Century: Setting the Framework*, vol. 2, Milano: Politecnico di Milano, pp. 313, 315.

contrary to the modern model, is an institution which keeps abreast of people's problems and vividly reacts to them.

The idea of a modern museum as a public institution was formed at the end of the 18th century and served as a symbol of official authority. The museum was a tool to form virtues of an exemplary citizen, to discipline the society and to reproduce legitimate culture. The museum was then a place of instilling fundamental values for the new order of authority. Its non-transparent relation to the political sphere became subject to criticism, both from the artistic and theoretical points of view⁶. Critical theories of the museum stimulated discussion of the social functions museums should perform. The concept of New Museology became a symbol of the challenges which contemporary museums are facing. Its assumption in the practice of museums is a visible marker of a public character of museums and, according to Jennifer Barrett⁷, they do not let them be isolated from politics. Museums are understood as public institutions which can include democratic principles and relations in their actions. If migration is a central issue for our discussion, we have to answer the question of the social mission of museums in this regard. The question particularly concerns those museums which address the issue of migration and multiculturalism, especially in light of the challenge the current migration processes pose to European multicultural policies, and more specifically: "What master narrative is more fruitful in keeping together a historical approach and a focus on contemporary challenges? Should the museum promote inclusion, dialogue and mutual understanding, or should it just demonstrate that migration is an eternal phenomenon, part of human nature and history, so that everybody can make connections at their own level, with their own tools? And more precisely: should immigrants work in the museums? How many languages should be spoken in guided tours and workshops? Should there be a place for the immigrants' communities to show off their culture, to celebrate, to discuss?"⁸

A more fundamental question appears, namely what the real influence of a contemporary museum on the life of individuals is, and more widely, to what extent museums can influence social change and support the public sphere. The assumption of Nancy Fraser's concept of "strong" and "weak" audience enables us to conclude that discussions currently taking place in museums have the power to form public opinion but are not reflected in the real decision-making process.

⁶ The following works, among others, belong to the canon of papers concerning a critical review of the institution of museums: C. Duncan (2006), *Civilizing Rituals. Inside Public Art Museum*, London–New York: Routledge; C. Duncan, A. Wallach (1980), *The Universal Survey Museum*, "Art History", vol. 3, No 4; P. Bourdieu, A. Darbel, D. Schnapper (1991), *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and Their Public*, Oxford: Polity Press; E. Hooper-Greenhill (2003), *Museum and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London–New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library.

⁷ J. Barrett (2011): *Museum and the Public Sphere*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

⁸ A.C. Cimoli, op. cit., pp. 323–324.

The functioning of the museum as a democratic institution is then only based on deliberative practices⁹. Moreover, when considering the sense of operation of the museum as a form of public space, it is necessary to take into consideration the condition of the contemporary public sphere. According to Jürgen Habermas, the observed disappearance of the public sphere is connected with more and more widespread indifference of citizens towards the state. It can be seen, among other things, in the transformation of the rationally discussing audience into individual consumers of culture who focus on their intimate area as they are disappointed with the quality of political life¹⁰. These processes question the potential of the museum to create the public sphere and approve of the fact that the museum is a weaker partner vis-à-vis the state in public debates. Nevertheless many researchers, like the already mentioned Barrett, acknowledge that the museum can support a democratic public sphere as a place of engaging communities¹¹. Peter Dahlgren and Joke Hermes express a similar view. They claim that the museum can assure the space for inclusive forms of citizens' activity, and that even a co-participation in cultural practices supports democratic ideas. Dahlgren and Hermes analyse what kind of social circumstances, cultural patterns or communication models strengthen the formation of citizens' identity. The developed citizen empowerment is reflected not only in activities in the political sphere but more widely in the broader civil society¹².

Theoreticians and practitioners who can see the need of making museums aware of the importance of public affairs also highlight that the interest in social issues does not imply the withdrawal from working on the collection: a conscious acceptance of the idea of social responsibility does not mean that the struggle against social issues will become the main purpose of the museum and that the museum will become the tool of social engineering and control in the hands of the government. At the same time, museums have to face the fact of being perceived only as institutions carrying out a cultural mission, which means that they are not taken into consideration as potentially equal partners in social projects (for example by employees from the health sector or social welfare)¹³.

Dahlgren and Hermes claim that the principal mission of public museums in a democratic society is to support, defend and increase the influence of democratic

⁹ N. Fraser (1992), *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, in: Calhoun C. (ed.), *Habermas and Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 132–136.

¹⁰ J. Habermas (1993), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Space. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, pp. 151–180.

¹¹ J. Barrett, op. cit., p. 20.

¹² P. Dahlgren, J. Hermes (2015), *The Democratic Horizons of the Museum. Citizenship and Culture*, in: Witcomb A., Message K. (eds.), *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published.

¹³ R. Sandell (2003), *Museum and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance*, in: Sandell R. (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London, New York: Routledge, p. 20.

mechanisms. Even if, according to Fraser¹⁴, it means only generating a debate, the very fact of making certain issues public can have an influence on social programmes carried out by diverse public institutions and NGOs. Museums can promote the participation of citizens, social engagement, as well as information on other cultures. Everyday activity of the museum can, according to Dahlgren and Hermes, support civic culture in six different dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, space, practices and identity¹⁵.

The educational function of a museum plays a key role in the creation of civic culture as one of the individual's rights in the democratic system is the **access to knowledge**. Getting to know one's own heritage as well as the history and culture of other societies and different belief systems is the key to understanding the mechanisms governing the globalised world and reinforcing a sense of belonging to a wider community. Contemporary museums have at their disposal many tools to disseminate knowledge – from traditional, linear descriptions of works on the exhibitions to multimedia projects engaging the senses and emotions in the process of cognition. However, the kind of knowledge indispensable to maintain the dynamics of the civil society is not definitely determined; it means that the scope and the way of disseminating information has to be constantly open for discussion, evaluation and changes and by this way adjusted to current social needs.¹⁶ Recently, museums have been offering their exhibiting space to cultural dialogue. On the one hand, exhibitions (mainly temporary ones) display the culture and heritage of migrants, present the history of migration or focus on microhistories. They present individual stories, emotions and experiences of people who had to leave their own country and search for shelter in a new place. The main goal of these exhibitions is to make citizens of host countries familiar with different cultures and lifestyles of migrants and to indicate positive aspects of multicultural societies. On the other hand, some museums meet the migrants' needs and prepare a cultural program, the aim of which is to help migrants adapt in a new place. A good example is the "Multaqā"¹⁷ programme, a joint project of a group of Berlin's museums supported by the Federal Administration of Culture and the Media, thanks to which 19 refugees were employed in museums as guides. Their task was to show groups of refugees around in their own language. A visit to a museum is a pleasant way to get to know the German history and culture but it is also a meeting with the cultural heritage of immigrants – for example the Pergamon Museum has the largest

¹⁴ N. Fraser, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–136.

¹⁵ Dahlgren and Hermes write about civic cultures in plural as a civic participation is implemented in many ways depending on prevailing social and economic relations, legal system and at present, its character is also formed by mass media. Cf. P. Dahlgren, J. Hermes, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–127.

¹⁷ Arabic for „meeting point” (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/27/berlin-museums-refugee-guides-scheme-fosters-meeting-of-minds>, accessed 13 January 2017).

collection of Muslim art. The clash of cultures in a museum is a favourable context to start a discussion on similarities between them. Besides symbolic benefits, the programme has also tangible benefits for people who were legally employed. One of the museum directors involved in the “Multaqā” project acknowledges: “When people are just waiting around with nothing to do, they can fall into a hole. They feel useless and worthless. But when you give people an important job to do, you also give them a certain status in your society”¹⁸.

The “Multaqā” Project is an example of social responsibility born by contemporary museums. These museums are open to the different cultural needs of the participants. A museum can support democracy if it is engaged in its projects in promoting such values as, for example, equality, reciprocity, tolerance, respect for others, politeness and responsibility, so that these values can become a part of citizens’ everyday life¹⁹. As Janet Marstine claims, social responsibility, along with radical transparency and maintaining cultural heritage, is a key aspect defining the new ethics of museums. According to the new ethics, relations between the museum and communities should be based on the moral activities of institutions. It is assumed that a museum can play a key role in creating a more just society. A new code of ethics has to approve of the complex context of activities of the contemporary museum and its capacity to shape the right direction for social change. According to Marstine, it is inseparably connected with the creation of a space favourable for social integration. A more just and varied approach to social integration requires a paradigmatic change of thinking about the aims and the role of the museum in society: what it means that a museum is public and what is the basis of democratic access to its resources. According to Marstine, an ethical and socially responsible museum can contribute to the integration at the level of individuals, community and society. From the point of view of an individual, museums are able to increase self-esteem, self-confidence and creativity. From the point of view of the community, a museum can be a catalyst for the re-birth of the community and for strengthening its identity. At the macro level, a museum can promote tolerance, respect for differences and fight stereotypes²⁰.

We can also perceive integration as a strategy of reinforcing social capital²¹, as it is based on social trust. The role of a museum which consists in building **mutual trust** can be based on creating a friendly atmosphere to foster safe relations with

¹⁸ P. Oltermann (2016), Berlin museums’ refugee guides scheme fosters meeting of minds, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/27/berlin-museums-refugee-guides-scheme-fosters-meeting-of-minds> [Accessed: 13.01.2017].

¹⁹ P. Dahlgren, J. Hermes, op. cit., p. 127.

²⁰ J. Marstine (2011), The contingent nature of the museum ethics, in: Marstine J. (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics. Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, London, New York: Routledge, pp. 11–13.

²¹ P.A. dos Santos (2008), Don’t we all have problems?, in: Voogt P. (ed.), *Can we make a difference? Museums, society and development in North and South*, Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, pp. 48–52.

strangers and increase social integration²². At the same time, it reinforces social capital. Taking part in cultural events creates the conditions for public celebration of community and appreciation of shared heritage. (For example in Somerville, Massachusetts, huge murals scattered around the city reflect the ethnic diversity of its population). Artistic projects often help to keep immigrants' own heritage and at the same time make it possible to settle down in the new place. Moreover, art has a potential to solve conflicts in societies and stimulate social dialogue – works of art which are especially moving, shocking, and original provide a strong incentive for a discussion about difficult social, political and spiritual issues²³. Projects which encourage building bonds among individuals can be divided, according to Robert Putnam, into those which favour the creation of bonding capital (and thus are concentrated on building solidarity inside the community and foster processes of exclusion), and those with an inclusive potential (which encourage interpersonal contacts between members of different groups of different social, political and professional identities)²⁴. The latter creates bridging capital and is more in demand from the point of view of the creation of multicultural societies. Thus it should be in the centre of activities undertaken in museums.

The inclusive potential of museums creates favourable circumstances to build the so-called “third spaces”²⁵. These are spaces which make it possible for individuals to come into safe interactions with strangers and have a social life. Museums can play the role of **public spaces**, which encourage participation practices, establish voluntary and informal contacts. The programme called “The Ahlan²⁶ Canada” realised by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship can be an example. The programme organises trips of Syrian refugees to Canadian institutions of culture. The main aim of these actions is to convince the immigrants that spaces in museums are also their spaces where they can feel safe and at ease²⁷.

The participation in activities offered by museums makes it possible to develop many competences that are needed to undertake **social practices**. Dahlgren and Hermes enumerate, for example, the ability to communicate effectively, the ability to organize meetings, discuss, use computers, take advantage of Internet resources. The lack of such skills can be an obstacle to actively adapt to democratic conditions.²⁸ Especially the work with immigrants requires developing language skills.

²² P. Dahlgren, J. Hermes, op. cit., pp. 127–128.

²³ *Better Together. The Report of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement In America* (2000), Cambridge: Harvard University, pp. 43–51.

²⁴ R.D. Putnam (2000), *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 20.

²⁵ R. Oldenburg (1989), *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, New York: Da Capo Press.

²⁶ Arabic for “welcome” (<http://www.ahlancanada.ca/>, accessed 13 January 2017).

²⁷ The Ahlan Canada program, <http://www.ahlancanada.ca/> [Accessed: 13.01.2017].

²⁸ P. Dahlgren, J. Hermes, op. cit., p. 129.

It is one of the aims of the programme “Travelling with Art: A Learning Project for Refugee Children” (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art). The authors put the idea in the following words: “We hope that the time we spend together in the space of art will create experiences that strengthen the young people socially and linguistically, and help them to create a social space where they can get to know one another better. (...) The idea is that their participation in the creative work will transcend the linguistic challenges that are a basic feature of the project”²⁹.

Participation in culture undoubtedly supports the **identity of citizens**. It enables to see oneself as a citizen; an individual able to undertake actions in the common interest. The task of museums is to support identity-building by means of delivering appropriate knowledge, developing practical skills and mutual trust as well as indicating values. The dimension of identity is thus the outcome of the above-mentioned tasks of the contemporary museum³⁰. The question of identity in multicultural societies is intrinsically problematic and as such it is also reflected in the activities of museums. Nederveen Pieterse distinguishes two approaches to culture which have different consequences for promoting multiculturalism in the practice of museums. The first is called static and the other open. The idea of static culture assumes that cultures are “separate entities”. According to this view, museums are responsible for preserving their “authenticity”. The idea of open culture, on the contrary, sees culture as a continuous process of constructing identity. In this sense, multiculturalism does not mean a co-existence of isolated cultural communities but rather a mosaic and a heterogeneous field of action for individuals. Pieterse’s typology indicates activities of museums which are potentially sensitive. Minorities should not be treated as separated and passive groups. Alternative approaches, such as unification tendencies and universalism, are no solution because they ignore the problem of minorities, Neither is the total integration with the dominant group. An effective multicultural policy should support generating such relations between groups in society which do not neutralize differences between them³¹, but contribute to enrich one another and create a community of a new quality. In such a community no one should be forced to give up their native identity. On the part of museums, it means that the cultural offering (exhibitions, educational programmes) cannot copy stereotypical and simplified images of migration. Tiffany Jenkins clearly stated that “With many migration and emigration museums, there is a tendency to present a reassuring story: the good migrant or refugee fleeing a serious but generalized threat from “over there”, the positive impact newcomers have on their host country (the food! the fashion!) without

²⁹ Travelling with Art. A Learning Project for Refugee Children, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art., Chaydler L.A., Bodin E., Jørgensen L.R (eds.), Louisiana: Rosendhals, s. 11, http://quickpaper.rosendahls.dk/louisiana/travelling_with_art/ [Accessed: 13.01.2017].

³⁰ P. Dahlgren, J. Hermes, op. cit., pp. 129–130.

³¹ P.A. dos Santos dos, op. cit., pp. 43–46.

reflecting on that host country. This can overlook a more complex reality exploring the precise reasons why migrants and refugees leave; the more troubling and difficult problems they encounter as they travel and upon arriving; as well as the feelings and actions of those in the host nation who are uncomfortable or hostile toward immigrants. And, as tempting as it is to ignore the feelings of those who are uneasy about immigration, or who feel like it threatens their way of life, their point of view shouldn't be simply airbrushed out of these displays for the sake of a political agenda³².

To analyze the engagement of museums in the problem of the current refugee crisis, and more widely in the issue of migration, it is necessary to be aware that museums are not designed to solve political problems. However, museums have at their disposal many tools to support the development of a dialogue between cultures, cultural and social integration, creating the atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding of different worldviews. Such actions can be effective in the fight with the exclusion of certain communities from participation in benefits and resources offered by the society: in the cultural, economic, social and political dimensions. The evaluation of numerous exhibitions in museums proves that museums can have a positive influence on the life of marginalised or disadvantaged groups and largely contribute to the creation of a more just society. In multicultural societies museums can support the alleviation of social problems at the level of the individual, the community and the whole society (obviously, not all entities can afford or are entitled to act in all three dimensions). Potential effects of the influence of activities of museums on the life of an individual are wide, ranging from psychological and emotional ones (such as improving one's self-esteem, developing the motivation to learn, enriching one's vocabulary and acquiring creative skills) to pragmatic ones (such as training one's skills and qualifications which increase employability)³³.

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³² T. Jenkins (2016), Politics Are on Exhibit at Migration Museums, Not History, "[Foreign Policy Magazine](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/19/can-curators-stop-marine-le-pen-migration-museums-europe/)", October 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/19/can-curators-stop-marine-le-pen-migration-museums-europe/>, accessed 13 January 2017.

³³ R. Sandell, op. cit., pp. 3–8.

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