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## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MUSEUM EDUCATION. RESEARCH DIRECTIONS<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The noticeable changes taking place in museums, regardless of the character of the collected and displayed artefacts or objects, allow one to draw attention to a definite turn towards the audience. Inclusiveness of educational activities, which results from the transition from passive to active cooperation methods, leads to an increasingly common educational turn within the field of museum studies. The article is an attempt to present the research perspective undertaken by the author. This kind of approach involves examining the role of museums in societal changes. The definition of social responsibility ought to be considered from different points of view while taking into consideration documents of museum strategies.

**Keywords:** museum education, social responsibility, audience development, museology, sociology

SPOŁECZNA ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚĆ EDUKACJI MUZEALNEJ. KIERUNKI BADAŃ

### Abstrakt

Zauważalne zmiany zachodzące w muzeach, bez względu na charakter gromadzonych i pokazywanych artefaktów czy obiektów, pozwalają zwrócić uwagę na zdecydowany zwrot ku publiczności. Inkluzywność edukacyjnej działalności wynikająca z przechodzenia od pasywnych do aktywizujących metod współpracy wywołuje coraz bardziej powszechny w muzealnictwie zwrot edukacyjny. Artykuł jest próbą omówienia przyjętych kierunków badawczych celem uchwycenia roli muzeów w zachodzącej zmianie społecznej. Definicja społecznej odpowiedzialności powinna być rozpatrywana z wielu perspektyw przy uwzględnieniu także dokumentów strategicznych muzeów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja muzealna, odpowiedzialność społeczna, rozwój odbiorców, muzeologia, socjologia

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## INTRODUCTION

“Beyond the captions, the information panels, the accompanying catalogue, the press handout, there is a subtext comprising innumerable diverse, often contradictory strands, woven from the wishes and ambitions, the intellectual or political or social or educational aspirations and preconceptions of the museum director, the curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor – to say nothing of the society, the political or educational system which nurtured all these people and in so doing left its stamp upon them. Such considerations, rather than, say, the administration of museums, their methods and techniques of conservation, their financial well-being, their success or neglect in the eyes of the public, are the subject matter of the new museology” (Vergo 1989, 3)<sup>3</sup>.

It was with these words of introduction that Peter Vergo began, in December 1988, his breakthrough discussion on the goals which are set for museums and museology, describing it as the new museology. As doctor Mirosław Borusiewicz noted, Vergo accused old museology of being concerned too much with the methodology of the museum activities, and not enough with their goals (Borusiewicz 2012, 102). It is therefore worth looking at the consequences and changes that Polish museology has experienced over the past thirty years. One of the most important effects is certainly the museum education to which this article has been devoted<sup>4</sup>.

This article is an attempt to outline research directions based on the grounded theory, using the triangulation of research techniques combining the analysis of the available documents (sources), observations, in-depth interviews and quantitative data facilitated by the investigated museums as well as by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ). This will help to diagnose the state of museum education in terms of its social responsibility and thus to complement the museum knowledge previously not described in this manner in Poland.

## 1. THE MUSEOLOGICAL VIEW

The educational shift which can be noticed in the current discourse allows to develop, as doctor Nieroba remarks, a new definition of the status of an artist, a curator, an educator, the audience, and the work of art in the creative act.

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotations within the text are the author's own translations from Polish sources [excluding Vergo's original citations].

<sup>4</sup> The article is an extension of the author's speech entitled “Social responsibility of museum education. Research directions.” during the international scientific conference “What's new? Revisiting new museology 30 years later” organized by the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Jagiellonian University, the Institute of Art History of the Jagiellonian University and the National Museum in Krakow on 20-21.11.2019 in Krakow.

“The new way of producing knowledge is supposed to be a tool which will make it possible to capture the past and current phenomena and to build new strategies of their communication. This way, an educational project that was until now aimed only at supporting, for example, an exhibition, has become an autonomous work of art itself” (Nieroba 2019, 107).

While summing up the research in her earlier work, “Between the common good and elitism. The contemporary museum model” from 2016, Nieroba wrote that “the world in which contemporary museums operate forces us to reflect on the social functions which they can fulfil. Each museum has to face different challenges – the structure and expectations of their target audiences are changing, and the methods of communication should be adjusted accordingly” (Nieroba 2016, 225). It seems, therefore, that it is impossible to continue the discussion on the subject mentioned without an interdisciplinary approach combining expertise and experience in museum knowledge with sociology and a great emphasis on the issue of social research. This can be an answer to Borusiewicz’s reflection that “unfortunately, Polish sociology academics continue to be disinterested in museums, thus any attempts at this type of research conducted by some universities tend to be fragmentary in nature and do not allow one to draw even general conclusions” (Borusiewicz 2012, 142). It can be stated that in the vast majority museum education, which is defined as the space of interaction of all visitors, is the right field for sociological research<sup>5</sup>.

Another crucial aspect is the issue of “social responsibility”. It is mostly associated with the world of business, where the phrase CSR – corporate social responsibility – is used. Professor Łukasz Gawęł has already written on CSR in the context of managing museums as public cultural institutions. He highlighted four areas in need of development and arrangement in Polish museums based on CSR: 1. organizational order, 2. relations with employees, 3. relations with the audience, 4. social engagement. He also added:

“Cultural institutions provide one of the most important spaces for negotiating cultural values as well as social and ethical norms (values) that are important for the community. However, the question is whether or not we are making a serious mistake by reflecting on their social responsibility” (Gawęł 2018a, 50).

In order to somewhat rectify that mistake, it ought to be mentioned that, since 2017, the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ) has been running a project on researching the museum audience and the way museums function in their social environment. In 2017 a report by Piotr T. Kwiatkowski and Beata Nessel-Łukasik entitled *Publiczność muzeów w Polsce*.

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<sup>5</sup> Here I would like to thank Professor Rafał Wiśniewski, a sociologist from the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw and head of the National Centre for Culture, for his inspiration and invaluable help with my research. I would also like to thank Izabela Bukalska, PhD, also from the Sociology Department of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw for her academic support.

*Badania pilotażowe* (Eng. Museum Audience in Poland. Pilot study) was published (Kwiatkowski and Nessel-Łukasik 2017); a year later the same authors presented yet another one – *Muzeum w społeczności lokalnej* (Eng. Museum in the Local Community) (Kwiatkowski and Nessel-Łukasik 2018b). In 2018 they published a handbook *ABC Badania publiczności w muzeum* (Eng. An ABC of Studies on Museum Audience) which was part of the complimentary training publications for museum experts (Kwiatkowski and Nessel-Łukasik 2018a). A significant input into the museum studies discourse is also provided by Elżbieta Nieroba (Nieroba 2016; Nieroba 2019), and one of the first publications within Polish studies on museum sociology was published by Jerzy Mikułowski-Pomorski (Mikułowski-Pomorski 1994), however it only broadly discusses the studies conducted between the 1950's and the 1970's.

## 2. THE SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

To initiate further discourse, several thoughts on the issue of museum education in the context of its social responsibility will be presented, in line with the previously defined deficits, on the basis of the paradigms it is based upon. It starts with setting symbolic interactionism as a starting point, which differentiates among three dimensions of social significance: 1. cognitive dimension, 2. communication dimension, 3. dramaturgical dimension or creating meanings in people's mutual interactions (Hałas 2006, 93). One should also take functionalism into account, with its view of the world as a system of elements linked with their functions, where understanding a specific social (or institutional) behavior requires thinking of how they serve the continued existence of the social system as a whole. For example, in order to understand the meaning of a museum, one should correctly identify the need which is to be met, i.e. the extent to which a museum serves social adaptation (Gofron 2008, 46). The assumptions of the neo-institutional theory are also worth pointing out, where an institution provides the foundation for the social order and the context for actions of individuals within the society. Institutions are social structures, relatively stable in time, shaping individuals' behaviors, and ensuring the experience of common values and the existence of coherent points of reference for identifying the meaning of particular actions (Marczewska 2016, 186).

Bearing in mind the groundbreaking research conducted by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper 1991; Wiśniewski et al. 2019, 42-51), yet another important summary of the issue of museum sociology, in both academic and institutional practice, was undertaken by Volker Kirchberg who touched upon the impact of society on museums and museums on society (Kirchberg 2016). Referring to the Weberian definition of action, he stated that it is justified to practice the sociology of museology, suspended between theory and practice both in the study of the institution, its recipients and social relations as museums are both the source and the result of human activity (Kirchberg 2016, 232). Kirchberg

referred to the 1996 breakthrough study of Gordon Fyfe and Sharon Macdonald entitled "Theorizing museums", which initiated the sociological discourse around museum science, understood as the continuous building of relations between the museum and values, memory, identity, economy and management. The impetus to start the sociological research in museums of various types has become the need to redefine their functions to confirm the need for their existence caused by postmodern changes, thus implying the presence of both new professional roles and market requirements associated with marketing research or research on the needs of recipients.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To illustrate the selected research process, it is necessary to present the grounded theory methodology developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss and described in their work entitled *The discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, firstly published in 1967 (Glaser and Strauss 2009). It has been refined, both theory- and workshop-wise, and published as a handbook by Kathy Charmaz under the title *Constructing Grounded Theory. A practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Charmaz 2009). In the realm of the methodology, it is particularly important for the researcher to remain open to forming and modifying the methods of collecting data, at the same time to improving them, bearing in mind that it might influence "what phenomena they will see, where and when they will notice them and what conclusions will be drawn out of them" (Charmaz 2009, 25). Occasionally, during the data collecting process, there might occur new materials, which primarily have not been taken into account. Concurrently, a theory should not be used to formulate a hypothesis prior to obtaining data (Charmaz 2009, 216).

"researchers using the grounded theory methodology very often initiate their studies, having had certain research interests and a general set of concepts. Those concepts are the source of preliminary ideas, which need to be considered, and they draw attention to certain questions which ought to be asked regarding the subject of the study" (Charmaz 2009, 27).

While searching for the essence of the grounded theory, which allows one to outline the research process consistent with the article's title, it is worth accentuating its character, following the idea of Kathy Charmaz. Thus, the submitted paper presents an adaptable and interactive nature, its research problem influenced the preliminary method of collecting data, and its author speaks as an integral part of the research topic (Charmaz 2009, 228). At the same time, it is important to notice that in the grounded-theory-based research, it is the analysis which guides the entire process, during which new methods of obtaining data might be necessary. However, the most significant aspects are:

- Consecutive levels of abstractions emerging during comparative analysis, which are the foundation of the analysis leading towards the grounded theory<sup>6</sup>.
- Analytical directions are rather based on researchers' reactions to their own comparisons, analysis and interpretations, rather than on external recommendations (Charmaz 2009, 229).

At this point, a few words must be presented on how the sample was selected for the needs of the researches. Since 2013, the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ) has been carrying out the research as part of the Museum Statistics project. The recently published data for 2017 (Andrzejkiewicz and Żmijewska 2018) show that 247 museums took part in the study, i.e. 24.1% of all the museums in Poland, whose total number was 1,027, regardless of the form of ownership. According to the information obtained by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections, 147 surveyed museums have either a promotion and image strategy or the results of surveys regarding their image and audience structure. Interestingly, what was missing from the survey was the question on the functioning of an institution based on strategic long-term development, and these were the most desirable for the purpose of the study. In cooperation with Professor Wiśniewski, 147 museums were asked to collaborate for the purposes of this research on museum social education, and to provide access to the previously mentioned documents. It should be noted here that, as a result of this discussion, paradoxically the institutions were most eager to share with the researches on their general development strategies. The more cooperative a museum was, having a promotion and image strategy or professional surveys available, the more it was found to operate primarily on the basis of a written general development strategy available in a version including accurate graphs and illustrations or photographs. A total of 65 museums responded to the invitation, of which 60 positively. Following an analysis of the available documents, seven museums were selected across Poland with regard to: the positioning of their education department in the organizational structure, the concept of its development, the shaping of its image, and its role in the communications. In this section it ought to be mentioned that the documents describing the museum strategy at a given time, are internal files developed according to the individual vision and possibility of the institution. It is challenging to describe them in a structured way and to systematize the data they contain as different criteria need to be applied for each one. Each of the seven museums also have a different form of ownership, comprising of: local-government museums, those reporting only to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, those run jointly by local governments and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage as well as museums managed by a different ministry. They additionally differ in the

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<sup>6</sup> While conducting data analysis new theories can be based upon the current research state and highlight both low level and overarching research themes, for more on the subject of grounded theory see Glenn A. Bowen (2006, 12-23).

nature of their collections, as there is an open-air museum (called a “skansen”), a city museum, a regional museum, a national museum, and a museum within a historical building with a garden. At the next stage of the research on each of the museums, in-depth interviews will be carried out with their directors or assigned deputies, heads of education departments, heads of departments responsible for communication, educators, persons in charge of keeping watch of the exhibitions.

Based on the grounded theory methodology, it is safe to assume that the interviews will be carried out one-by-one in subsequent institutions, in order to fill in the gaps in data and make the study more specific. Thanks to the definition of “new museology”, slow but noticeable changes have started to take place in the functioning of museums as structures, in the awareness of their employees’ actions, in the relations initiated with their audiences, and in the developed offer. The conducted qualitative and quantitative research based on data triangulation will provide an answer to the questions about:

- The place currently held by education, understood as a department in the organizational structure of a museum, as the nature of the offer, and, finally, as a form of dialogue with the audience.
- How do the respondents interpret the issue of museum education responsibility?
- What kind of change can museum education cause in society in general, and what kind of changes does it cause within an institution?
- What are the correlations among the changes taking place in museums, changes relating to technology, marketing, promotion and image, or changes in approaches and teaching methods?
- How does it affect social capital, and to what extent does it contribute to its creation?
- How does museum education affect social change among groups with disabilities and groups from the so-called disadvantaged backgrounds?
- At the same time, one should ask whether, through education, society is given an opportunity to reflect on what is the purpose of museums. The process should lead, through the satisfaction gained from the contact with heritage, to understanding and noticing its value, consequently evoking the feeling of being responsible for that heritage (Gawel 2018b, 20).
- Does museum education shape permanent attitudes of responsibility, involvement, and concern about culture and heritage?
- What kind of contribution, if any, can an individual make to the social system?
- How can a selection of museum education methods affect those changes in the macro- and micro- society?
- What kind of an impact on the relations among museum employees will such an offer have, assuming it is prepared in a joint, cross departmental, and conscious manner?

- Finally, how can one foster, through cooperation with educators, the awareness of the social role of a museum among employees who are not related to museum education in their day-to-day work?

“Investigating the artistic sphere creates the necessity to make research decisions fundamental from the sociological standpoint. Establishing facts is imperative to re-create the sphere of imaginations, which seems both mandatory and difficult in case of a discipline operating in axiological categories, as it happens within art. The sociologist has two options which are the stages of research development. They can stop at the first stage in accordance to the positivist assumptions and discover the truth which lies under the layer of imaginations and representations, what is closer to the critical approach. Anthropological inspirations may, however, make this stage the primary memento of a complex study which distinguishes logic immanent to creating and consolidating imaginations” (Heinich 2010, 114).

Museum education, which in Polish source literature to a large degree is treated mainly in terms of statistics<sup>7</sup>, requires a more descriptive approach and an in-depth qualitative analysis, paying attention to the character of its reception, and possibly broadening its conceptual apparatus<sup>8</sup>. It is particularly important nowadays, when museums are facing challenges such as population aging, cultural diversity, intensification of everyday online communication, the need of individuals for participation in the institutional life, and the question of sustainable development during economically difficult times. The matter of social responsibility regarding museum education opens new fields of studies, especially based on the grounded theory methodology. Professor Marian Golka clearly emphasized that “the reception of art is the only confirmation of its societal value, being also the public expression of its fate” (Golka 2008, 170) as well as that “only the act of perceiving art by the audience ensues its societal fulfillment and a unique kind of creation” (Golka 2008, 170). At this point it is impossible to advance any further thesis without conducting the above-mentioned studies because, as Golka stated, “the status of art is determined by its reception, and the reception is determined by the audience, whose existence we are aware of, not fully knowing what their contours or specific figure are” (Golka 2008, 185). It is one of the key statements, which ought to be treated with the utmost attention by the majority of Polish museums. As observations and conversations show, the museum environment is still lacking proper research on

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<sup>7</sup> The first and last of such in-depth quantity studies in museum education was published in 2012 (Szeląg 2012), which exemplifies the need for the continuation given the field’s dynamic situation in Poland.

<sup>8</sup> The term which does not seem to appear within the Polish museum sphere is “mediation”, used more and more often in the field of art sociology as well as in the museum practice in Western Europe, particularly regarding contemporary art. “It designates all the mediations between the artwork and its recipients” (Heinich 2010, 83). Observations and interviews conducted by the author lead to the conclusion that the term art mediation is predominantly dedicated to educational actions focused on contemporary art, where the dialogue moderated and inspired by art educators seems to be the most effective mean of communication.

the audience statistics – their age, origin, perception possibilities, needs etc. The studies must go beyond marketing and report needs in order to broaden the circle of recipients, not only in attendance depiction, but also by answering their needs. “The incomplete image of the needs and expectations of particular audience groups makes certain undertakings insufficient as the proposals are often inadequate to the hopes of potential recipients, leading to create new models of education” (Nessel-Łukasik 2019, 179). To make those museum initiatives satisfactory to the potential guest’s expectations, the host needs to build a systematic, extensive relation with its audience. Especially nowadays, in times of social media and highly developed research possibilities, the fear of decreasing number of visitors can be minimized – “the status of art is determined by its reception, and the reception is determined by the audience, whose existence we are aware of, not fully knowing what their contours or specific figure are” (Golka 2008, 185). To make the reception process even clearer for the decision-maker, Golka distinguished the following components: sensorial perception, aesthetic experience, reading, evaluation, memorizing, internalizing the value, influence on the basics (Golka 2008, 186)

Summarizing, as Marian Golka noticed, the influence on the basics is hard to measure and is relatively rare, being relatable only to exceptional art works and experiences (Golka 2008, 198-199). However, from the author’s point of view it is the most interesting element of grand process of not only the perception of the artwork, museum artefact or presented object but its consequences for both the audience and the offer provider i.e. the museum.

#### THE SUMMARY

Although the need for social research within the Polish museum field receives increasingly more attention, it is not sufficient due to the lack of funding for such measures being the usual culprit. However, this demand faces many other obstacles as seen in the statement received from one of the museums “audience surveys were carried out here by a local university a year ago, but we didn’t think about asking them for the results. As for the number of visitors, we do count them, but we don’t draw any conclusions based on that”. It is therefore necessary to show measurable results that can be achieved by investigating the audiences’ preferences; and this means educating museum employees. One cannot speak of “audience development”, which has been gaining more and more popularity recently, unless the real needs of that audience are considered with a reasonable approach by the designers of the offer. The academic and pragmatic approach is provided in the quote by Professor Łukasz Gawel:

“While searching for a definition of a museum meeting the needs of today’s audiences, used to sophisticated visual communication being present in various areas of their lives, one should look for a way to combine the requirements of protecting, collecting and documenting exhibits with their modern dissemination, taking into account the diverse needs of contemporary

audiences. (...) modern museum education can make a breakthrough in all those museums in which the belief is still held that these institutions are made for things, not for people” (Gaweł 2018b, 31).

Such an attitude towards the problem, which is likely to have laid the foundations for the new museology as understood by Peter Vergo 30 years ago, nowadays should be considered museums’ duty in order to work for the development of museology in the social sense and at the same time to cooperate with the society for the positive future of museum studies.

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