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IDEALISM IN MUSEUM

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Museum Activism, ed. by Robert R. Janes, Richard Sandell, Routledge 2019, pp. 445

*Activism is not a household word among museum practitioners and academics, curators or museologists, and generates responses from raised eyebrows, to mild panic, to outright criticism;*¹ this is how the Editors of an extensive volume of papers titled *Museum Activism* begin discussing its content. If, therefore, in the English-speaking world of postcolonial settlement societies and postimperial ones (papers' Authors are predominantly affiliated to various institutions based in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia), museum activism does not seem an obvious thing, then what would the confrontation with the situation in other *cultural museum areas* of the world look like? And I do not mean here the overview of *museum activism national traditions*, subdued to the modern taxonomy of the United Nations and UNESCO, which would most likely yield a more or less internalized self-colonization, but my intention is a good understanding of this volume as seen from the Polish reader's perspective.

Aktywizm (activism), the Anglicism ubiquitous and well-rooted in contemporary Polish, did not emerge only because of the status of Polish social area, semi-peripheral versus its Western inspiration; while undoubtedly pointing to the Western sources, it also tries to detach itself from the associations that the Polish word *działacz* (activist) and its potential derivatives inspire. I suppose this stems from the Communist Party and Communist Poland connotations: when going back to Polish from the Communist times, we will clearly spot the difference between a party *aktywista* and a party *działacz*, which the English language, void of the experience with the Soviet totalitarianism is unable to convincingly render. In the quoted difference, *aktywista* (as a matter of fact, in Polish of the 1950s the word was obviously a Russianism, not Anglicism) is an individual of ideas, whereas *działacz* does not necessarily embody such an ideological attitude, though a strongly institutionalized form of a party commitment. The clear-cut nature of this distinction regrettably blurs when Solidarity *działacze* (plural of

działacz) appear, who are unquestionably very ideological, and who would have never been called *aktywiści* (plural of *aktywista*). However, as it seems today, in contemporary Polish *aktywizm* means an attempt at a positive reevaluation of being active and its ideological conditioning, detaching it from *działaczostwo* from the times of Communist Poland and the current political scene of party *działacze* copying that old scheme. At the same time, the distinction between *aktywista* (she/he) and *działacz* (she/he) in the positive perception of the word, namely away from party politics, often reflects the degree of institutionalization and systemic placing of their engagement, with *aktywizm* locating itself closer to the asystemic extreme of the range, while *działanie na rzecz* seems closer to its establishment end: the examples being 'feminist activist' (*aktywistka feministyczna*), and 'activist for women's rights' (*działaczka na rzecz praw kobiet*).

I have allowed myself these linguistic digressions, since in the Polish context 'activism' clearly shows a tension between ideology and institutionalization, pointed to by only one Author of the papers included in the discussed book, rooted in the Anglo-Saxon post-imperial and postcolonial perspective. Diana I. Popescu, the Author in question, is a graduate from and affiliate to British academic institutions, who comes from Romania: she almost straightforwardly warns against the dangers of institutionalized activism.² Museum curators in the national states involved in post-totalitarianism in the post-Soviet version have, as it seems, slightly different reasons than their post-imperial and post-colonial colleagues in whom the word 'activism' in the museum context may inspire 'mild panic' or 'outright criticism'.

Yet, maybe, despite all the differences between museum globalities presented by the Editors of *Museum Activism*, their arguments that museum operation strategies should be extended with 'activism' are worth considering also from the perspective of other post-dependence conditionings. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (both affiliated to the British University of Leicester), who are the ones to have

gathered the papers on museum activism into an extensive volume, base their conviction that museum practices should be extended with different forms of activism on a definite vision of reality whose museum is a part of. Importantly, Janes and Sandell formulate their diagnosis from inside of this reality, and not from a safe distance, which could guarantee 'neutrality' which a modern researcher keeps. One of the elements of this diagnosis is the questioning of a certain feature of the museum as an institution which they refer to as the 'myth of neutrality'.³ Obviously, the very deconstruction of the myth of museum's neutrality, conducted already in the 1990s,⁴ does not imply the necessity of activist engagement; yet, it does have an impact on the argumentation backing the activist attitude as a conscious choice made in the situation when siding with certain values turns out to be inherently inscribed within the museum's essence. Conscious or unconscious failing to voice one's ideological conditions, does not only consolidate the myth of neutrality: *there is an obvious contradiction in enacting a practice which aims to increase the critical, political consciousness of the viewer, within a space that makes a foundational principle out of obscuring the ideological and political nature of its own work.*⁵

The perception of museums as social institutions constituting a part of the value-generating system causes that the current problems of society turn into museums' maladies, with museums undertaking actions in reaction to these difficulties. *The world needs activist museums and activist practitioners to provide cultural frameworks to identify and challenge the myths and misperceptions that threaten all of us—such as the preposterous notion that continuous economic growth is the key to our well-being. Growth means consumption, and unbridled consumption is destroying the planet. We need a new kind of museum, a transitional and activist institution, to articulate and present the new narrative 'that overrides humanity's outdated, innate expansionist tendencies.'*⁶ Defining its challenges from the perspective of the global threat that climate change is, activism emphasizes the adopted perspective: a museum speaks and acts from inside human society and from inside the world in which man is but one of the elements. Museum activism is the opposite of social alienation of museums: in this respect, it undoubtedly draws from the already long-standing experience of New Museology⁷ and participatory museum.⁸ At the same time, from the perspective of the experience inaccessible as yet to New Museology criticizing social detachment of museums and their anachronistic elitism,⁹ it negatively evaluates market populism and success measured with the number of visitors only, and not with the variety of museum offer and its accessibility to minority and marginalized groups. The attraction of the biggest possible number of visitors as the main, and often only index of success, in the view of Janes and Sandell translates into 'museum's inbreed' and not openness to the world and its challenges.¹⁰ *Culture is not about leisure, entertainment, and the overwhelming distractions of social media. Culture is about how we lead our lives,*¹¹ say Janes and Sandell. In their understanding, museums are part of such-conceived culture.

Continuing such an understanding of culture, typical of critical museology, activist museums *have the opportunity and the obligation to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed. Activism also means resistance*

*— the critical questioning and re-imagining of the status quo.*¹² However, as Victoria Hollows says about the role of museum staff in the context of their institutions' activism: *Activism doesn't necessarily mean conflict or protest; it can be on a small as well as a large scale. It does not have to be conducted by someone who identifies themselves as 'an activist,' or who holds a particular position in society or within an organisational structure. Activism doesn't belong to 'other' people; we all have agency and therefore we all have the capacity to make change. Recognising and owning our agency is the first step towards making change; then it is about what we do and how, and equally what we don't do.*¹³ A critical approach, public commitment, and acting in order to change social awareness are, according to Janes and Sandell, an ethical responsibility of contemporary museums, next to their basic tasks such as informal education, research, and collection preservation, since they constitute *a three-dimensional, cultural memory bank (...)* museums are tool, technology, history, and art banks — *curating the most distinctive trait of our species — the ability to make tools and things of beauty.*¹⁴ Museums are all the more morally obliged to engage in social activism, since at the time of the radical drop in social trust, this being a consequence of the digital revolution, museums remain one of the social institutions worldwide which inspire the greatest trust.¹⁵ Such a vision of a contemporary museum and its role is effectively described by the concept of a museum as an institution whose approach is defined as 'mindful': a conscious museum, attentive and full of care.¹⁶

Museum Activism aims at presenting actions which implement such a museum vision. The Authors, over 50 of them, are museologists and practitioners from various areas of museum operations, predominantly curators, educators, and specialists in communication and contact with museum public. The Anglo-Saxon locality of the perspective¹⁷ mentioned above has not been in any way reflected upon or even merely signalled, which makes a reader slightly concerned with respect to the universalizing claims of the whole publication. The majority of the papers, however, tackle such specific local situations (even if speaking of the National Gallery in London) that the experience gathered in *Museum Activism* can be treated as a catalogue of good practices serving to disseminate and support *striving for inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of working; a commitment to dismantling inequalities and advancing justice; respect for expertise derived from lived experience; support for human rights for all, and an acknowledgement of our collective responsibilities for environmental stewardship.*¹⁸ The papers referring to museums of various types (e.g., from local and historical museums, art museums and museums enjoying the national status) have been divided into three thematic groups relevant to the three parts of the book. The first of them, titled *Nurturing activism* refers to the changes in museum as an institution, its historical past and the style of work, as well as employee activism; the second, called *Activism in practice*, the most extensive one, presents different actions undertaken on a different scale, while the third one: *Assessing activism*, combines papers whose Authors try to draw conclusions from activism experience and attempt at assessing the future risk and foreseen consequences of one's own actions and attitudes they describe as *immorality of inaction.*¹⁹



Many of the actions described in the book tackle the broadly conceived issue of museum accessibility, both in the sense of physical access and the possibility to participate in the programme, as well as barriers of social character. Accessibility as a problem appears together with the reflection on the differentiation of the public resulting both from the democratization of social life, and from a strong bond museums have with their own local environment. This gains an additional meaning in the situation when the differentiation is affected owing to demographic changes, such as society ageing and immigrant inflow. All the social processes to which museums react are treated by the Authors as elements of the world known to the reader and not really requiring any explanation other than the current political context. It seems, however, that translating these definite experiences to the social conditionings of the public from other localities in which the relations of powers and museums' entanglement in them boast a different history, may at times prove complicated. Just as it is difficult for a Polish visitor to understand the excluding potential of Edward S. Curtis's photos, protested against by contemporary American artists and intellectuals; the photographer, following his truly romantic instincts, folkloric enthusiasm, and rapture, recorded (while aestheticizing and stereotyping) the vanishing world of Indigenous American communities; similarly, an Anglo-Saxon visitor will find incomprehensible the vindictive elitism of a spirit of a museum aristocrat who provided an exhibit in one of the most frequently visited museums in Cracow with the label: 'Amice parura', devoid of any additional explanation. Equality is similar everywhere, meanwhile social inequalities manifest themselves differently.

Exclusion from and inclusion in every community, also the community of the museum public, are conditioned by cultural taxonomies, while the very identification of the barriers a certain excluded group faces requires a deepened reflection on the mechanisms of social exclusion, also those we apply ourselves. As much as inclusiveness for individuals who display physical and mental qualities which diverge from the majority standard is a widely acknowledged claim, despite not necessarily always being implemented, identity differences which are not rooted in the difference acclaimed by the dominating majority as worthy of compassion, are much more difficult to be covered with inclusiveness. In the situation when exclusion of another person is perceived as a defence of one's own status, there appears an 'amice parura' aimed at the aggressive populace. Nonetheless, the book's Editors are of the opinion that contemporary museums do not need to defend their position before the public; what is more, they should turn the public into their ally, partner, and co-creator, trying to extend the accessibility of their own space and collection, and to adjust their messages to the public differing in needs and capacities. The urgency to root a museum in the community of visitors, and cherishing the bonds with its various representatives is reiterated in almost every paper. The articles gathered in the book are examples of actions including others differing racially and ethnically, boasting a body differing from the majority standards, a different intellectual capacity, a different gender identity and sexual orientation, a different age than the dominating one... An idealistic vision of a museum-activist dominating in the book translates into the claim that the more xenophobic, racist, and discriminating the museum's social environment is, the more sensitive and inclusive it should be.

One of the areas for museum activism can be found in curatorial practices. The presented cases include both displays in art museums (Tate Liverpool or London's National Gallery), museums boasting historical, ethnographic, and natural exhibits (national and local), and narrative commemorative museums (Columbia's Memory Museum, museums commemorating the Holocaust). The papers point to numerous dimensions of activist curatorial practices which, however, become, first of all, the space for questioning the myth of museum's neutrality in many aspects: the colonial genesis of the collection, attitude towards climate, constructing national identity narratives, or finally the issue of the presence of the curator's voice in the exhibition. The latter is analysed by Lynn Wray who questions the curatorial strategy popular in the 2000s consisting in giving up the author's voice and the curator withdrawing to a position of an impartial mediator. As shown by Wray, the strategy is based on the assumption that the exhibition space from which the curator has withdrawn becomes a neutral zone, while the beholder, taking power over it, can express his/her own opinions and political values. Nonetheless, despite the democratic assumptions which were aimed at beholder's emancipation from under curatorial dictatorship, *anti-authorialism is a misdirected and often counter-productive route to boosting the political agency of the visitor*,²⁰ contrariwise, generating new cognitive barriers. These, in turn, alienate the beholder, instead of emancipating him/her, not to mention the boosting of their critical capacities. It happens so, since *anti-authorial approaches place the responsibility for*

*making meaning firmly in the hands of the viewer-as-reader;*²¹ bearing this in mind, if visitors fail to achieve the goal, and the works incite no emotional or critical reaction in them, there is a chance that they may regard it a consequence of their limitations, which might discourage them from further participating in art exhibitions. Thus, *it would make more sense, then, for curators, to harness their symbolic power and use it as a means of political influence, rather than trying to neutralise their own privileged position.*²² All the more so, since, as Wray points, *by refusing to take a position or articulate a vision of an alternative future, curators risk leaving exhibitions as disarticulated sites of openness. In doing so (...) they leave the ground open to non-progressive forces and right-wing extremists who tend to be less reserved about asserting their own beliefs and values.*²³

The issue of the museums' role in the context of the responsibility for the climate, raising social awareness, urgency to create new narratives about the relation of man with the world, and the revision of one's own museum practices is reiterated in the book on many occasions. As pointed by the Authors of a paper who combine their own activist experience with the overview of this very problem as seen from the American perspective, *in order for museums to matter in a time of climate crisis, they must first reject the claim to political neutrality that structures and limits their transformative social power.*²⁴ In the context of climate crisis, the myth of neutrality becomes particularly ominous. According to Janes, *museums have vastly increased their reliance on corporate funding, yet failed to acknowledge that accepting corporate funding is not a neutral act, it helps to reproduce the neoliberal ideology capitalist enterprises are grounded in,*²⁵ while many of the entities financing museums conduct activity which overtly contradicts acting for climate. One of such economic giants is BP whose financing of the most prestigious institutions of British culture has for some time

been criticized. The book contains a paper dedicated to the actions of activists of the British Culture Unstained organization²⁶ in relation to several exhibitions mounted in British and Australian museums, and sponsored by BP.²⁷ Museums' entanglement in the market ideology that Janes writes about also provides an opportunity to formulate a new climate-friendly narrative which would clearly articulate the need to restrict development and question the equalling of production and consumption increase with wellbeing. Actually, practices of many museums do not particularly leave any doubts as for the inconsistency of this narrative with their operations: financially and climatically costly projects defined as 'vanity buildings', partially resulting from the Bilbao after-effect, installation parts of temporary exhibitions being dumped, assessing exhibition's success based on the consumption of gadgets sold in the museum shop, or last but not least, the unlimited collection extension, all these, as the Editors point, are not actions neutral to the environment.²⁸ Therefore, before museums become activist institutions which *can evolve to a new level of meaning as an activist institution committed to individual and societal well-being, however, various internal challenges and habits of mind need to be addressed that continue to impede or diminish the museum as a key intellectual and civic resource.*²⁹

An idealist museum constructed in the book *Museum Activism* on the ground of the experiences and assumptions it describes, looms as an avant-garde of egalitarian actions and narratives. Out of an elitist institution which accustomed lower classes to a modern discipline of the body, mind, and taste, at the same time socializing them to the hierarchy of the modern 'society of equals' based on taste sensitivity, museums have to transform into institutions really sensitizing to discrimination and inequality. It is, therefore, not surprising that the phrase: 'museum activism' can cause a mild panic or actually outright criticism...

Abstract: The extensive volume edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell titled *Museum Activism* is composed of papers by over 50 authors. They are in majority case studies, with examples from most varied institutions. Museum activism is the opposite to museum social alienation; in this respect, the first definitely draws from the many-years' experience of New Museology and participatory museum. Museum activism advocates are negative about the commercial populism and the success measured by turnout only, and not that measured exclusively by the differentiation of the museum offer and its accessibility to minority and marginalized groups. According to the Editors, contemporary museums are more morally obliged to engage in social activism, since in the times of a radical drop of social trust worldwide, museums still constitute one of the social institutions considered as trustworthy. Many of the

actions described in the book concern the sphere of museum accessibility broadly speaking, both in the sense of physical access and possibility to participate in the programme, and barriers of social nature. Another sphere of museum activism is made up of curatorial practices. The texts point to many dimensions of activist curatorial practices which, however, first of all become the space for questioning the myth about museum's neutrality in many respects: the colonial collection genesis, attitude towards climate, narratives constructing national identity, or finally the issue of the presence of curator's voice in an exhibition. In many of the papers the role of museums in the context of the responsibility for the climate, of raising social awareness, of constructing a new narrative on the relation between man and the world, as well as the necessity to revise one's own praxis are reiterated.

Keywords: social activism, museum, critical approach, accessibility, climate crisis.

Endnotes

- ¹ R.R. Janes, R. Sandell, 'Posterity Has Arrived. The necessary emergence of museum activism', in: *Museum Activism*, ed. by R.R. Janes, R. Sandell, London-New York 2019, pp. 2-3.
- ² D.I. Popescu, 'Memory activism and the Holocaust memorial institutions of the 21st century', in: *Museum Activism...*, p. 328.
- ³ R.R. Janes, R. Sandell, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ⁴ See e.g.: T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, London-New York 1995; *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. by I. Karp, S.D. Lavine, Washington-London 1991.
- ⁵ L. Wray, 'Taking a position: Challenging the anti-authorial turn in art curating', in: *Museum Activism...*, p. 320.
- ⁶ R.R. Janes, R. Sandell, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- ⁷ See e.g.: *The New Museology*, ed. by P. Vergo, New York 1989; V. McCall, C. Grey, 'Museums and the "new museology": theory, practice and organisational change', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29 (2013), 1-17.
- ⁸ N. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz 2010.
- ⁹ K. Hudson, *Museums for the 1980s. A Survey of World Trends*, Paris-London 1977, p. 15.
- ¹⁰ R.R. Janes, R. Sandell, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, p. 6.
- ¹³ V. Hollows, 'The Activist Role of Museum Staff', in: *Museum Activism...*, p. 86.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.
- ¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ R.R. Janes, 'The mindful museum', *Curator*, 3 (53, 2010), 325-338.
- ¹⁷ The Authors not affiliated to British, American, Canadian, and Australian institutions who definitely constitute a minority, come from Austria, Norway, Portugal, Brazil, Columbia, and Zimbabwe.
- ¹⁸ *Museum Activism...*, p. XXVIII.
- ¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 291.
- ²⁰ L. Wray, *op. cit.*, p. 316.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 319.
- ²² *Ibidem*, p. 320.
- ²³ *Ibidem*, p. 319.
- ²⁴ S. Lyons, K. Bosworth, 'Museums in the climate emergency', in: *Museum Activism...*, p. 174.
- ²⁵ After: L. Wray, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
- ²⁶ The name obviously refers on the one hand to the polluting qualities of oil itself, and to the not always morally clear interests of a corporation on the other.
- ²⁷ Serafini, Ch. Garrard, 'Fossil fuel sponsorship and the contested museum: Agency, accountability and arts activism', in: *Museum Activism...*, pp. 69-79.
- ²⁸ *Museum Activism...*, p. 13.
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

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