# TIES AND IDENTITY BONDS. MUSEUM EDUCATION AND COGNITIVE CONSERVATISM

**Leszek Karczewski**
University of Lodz
ORCID 0000-0002-7721-4280

*It is our knowledge – the things we are sure of – that makes the world go wrong and keeps us from seeing and learning.*
(Lincoln Steffens)

The Enlightenment origin of the museum as an institution almost guarantees that museums play a relevant role in creating identity of both individuals and communities. This certainty is founded on numerous testimonies of personal and social transformations. In the present paper I include conclusions stemming from sociological and psychological experiments in the debate. They prove that change of the worldviews of museums' recipients can be both radical and durable. All this demonstrates that museums have an increased responsibility to shape its public's awareness. What also grows is the weight of the conflicts of world visions (and the need to analyse them) which are implemented in museums. Therefore, I suggest to include the analysis of museum education actions in the sphere of research into participatory or relational art.

In the paper I resort to the concept of 'cognitive conservatism' of the philosopher Barbara Herrnstein Smith. She redefines the concept of 'conservatism', in her specific sense not referring to the traditionalistic vision of the world, but the cognitive mechanism shared by all humans according to which a human brain functions (also of individuals of progressive worldview). Meanwhile, a human brain is 'conservative': it favours phenomena previously identified over the new ones. It also prefers the stimuli which confirm (or herald) the previously known phenomena. In this way the mind creates, e.g., personal identity.

Nevertheless, identity, the vision of oneself, is extremely complex. It covers the sense of pertaining to a definite group, distinct from other groups (social identity), and the bond with a set of community-shared values (cultural identity), dynamically conditioning self-awareness of an individual, their response to the question: who am I?

## We, museum curators

The essence of social identity is shown in the 1970 classical experiment of Henri Tajfel proving a biased attitude towards one's own group (in-group).[1] Disfavouring others (out-groups) is not an effect of prejudices or stereotypes. The so-called minimal group paradigm is created by the very fact of membership (We-ness); this provides a sufficient justification for a dislike of an out-group. The opposition Us/Them (not Us) is basic for the very concept of 'Us', and thus, a-culturally independent of the 'content' which constitutes the group.[2]

The concept of cultural identity refers to the bonds a definite individual has with a group whose convictions, values, norms, and social praxes are internalized in the process of acculturation. Respective individuals can affirm tradition, heritage, language, religion, descent, aesthetics, thinking patterns, or social structures to a varied degree, however, these constitute a dynamic and multi-aspect element of their self-awareness. Both identities: cultural and social, are complementary.[3]

With respect to the world of museums social identity is created by being employed at a museum (which allows one to proudly distinguish him- or herself from the individuals lacking this legitimation). Cultural identity seems far more complex. In the metaphorical sense, one can speak of the identity of the museum institution as such. Firstly, the organizational identity, in its definition distinguishing museums from other cultural institutions,[4] regulated by a charter. Secondly, the created narrative identity, called also mission, vision, and brand, expressed overtly or inherent in the museum's programme. Furthermore, organizational

and narrative identities are constructed by a team whose respective individuals internalize, at least partially, the culture of the museum community, this creating a complex network of mutual identity interdependencies.

Each visit of a person to a museum, however, reveals two identities: one of a definite person and of a definite museum. Crossing the borderline of the institution can be a boosting experience confirming membership in a community; on the other hand, it can also constitute a challenge or even force individuals to revise their values. The borderline is not only present in space (the museum gate), but also in time (visiting). The borderline zone is patrolled by individuals from the team of museum educators. As much as this may sound trivial, let us briefly remind that the role of education (both formal and informal) in shaping individual's cultural identity cannot be overestimated; actually, the formative effect is exerted both by so-called educational contents and methods.

The potential conflict on the borderline of the visitor and the museum reveals a symptomatic feature which I would now like to focus on: conservatism. Saying 'conservatism', I do not mean a traditionalist worldview, but conservatism as attachment to the status quo. One can conservatively guard one's own identity regardless of what composes it: it can be constituted by a social order based on the values related to the ideas of religion, nation, state, family, hierarchy, authority, while equally it can be constituted by the defence of individual rights and liberties. It is precisely this mechanism of favouritism that I would like to take a closer look at.

## Bonds of cognitive ties

The philosopher Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls this natural predilection for one's own identity 'cognitive conservatism'.[5] Its existence is confirmed by one empirical premise: human tendency to give priority to confirming the previously explained phenomena over what contradicts them. Whatever questions our convictions irritates us so strongly that not only do we not consider contact with such phenomena as an opportunity for a potential enlightenment, but we even discredit 'reliable contradicting arguments' as being fashionable, ideological, or particularistic, while we consider 'patently contradictory arguments' as dubious, manipulated, or simply a fluke. What is the result? A banana closed in the storage room of the identity dogma.

However, this tendency does not prove people's blindness, thick headedness, or irrationalism. Neither is it limited to the sphere of science (where it was identified by Ludwik Fleck[6] or Thomas S. Kuhn[7]). This is precisely what we call 'cognitive conservatism', biased favouritism of one's identity (it precisely yielded a whole science discipline: sociology of science).

Conservatism conceived as in-group favouritism of one's identity does not constitute a speculated topic of humanities. There exist 'hard' naturalistic proofs demonstrating 'cognitive conservatism': human neurophysiologically conceived cognitive mechanisms are discriminative.

The aspiration to achieve an effective interaction with changeable surroundings causes that human mind ordering the chaos of sensual stimuli generates predictions, forecasts future stimuli on the grounds of the observed statistical regularity or based on associations. The information of predictive value, favouring the status quo, consolidates certainty and stability of interactions with the environment. That is why the mind perceives it as particularly worthy for categorization of perception, and searches for it proactively.[8] Experiments reveal that the mind gives the priority to a predictive stimulus over a predictable one. Therefore, a biased attitude is not just fundamental for cognition, but it also plays a role in valuative processes. We, humans, neurophysiologically opt for preserving the status quo. The cognitive conservatism are the bonds, objectively existing in our minds, which condition a biased preference for subjectively experienced ties.[9]

How can, therefore, any identity transformation occur? Despite the overwhelming aspiration to preserve the status quo it is undesirable to have preferences which differ from the preferences of the individuals we like (in-group) and to have preferences identical with the preferences of the individuals we do not like (out-group). Under such circumstances of the lack of balance people change their choices in order to consolidate their bonds with the people they like, but also to distinguish themselves from the disliked individuals. The effect is called 'cognitive balance'.[10]

The tendency is extremely strong. There was a group of 18 students at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) who aesthetically valuated trivial objects: 174 T-shirts. The value of the T-shirts which people did not like initially grew when those individuals learnt that other Caltech representatives liked them or that they were disliked by sexual predators; the value decreased when people learnt that other Caltech representatives disliked them or that they were also liked by criminals. On average, the change stood at 9.41 on a 14-point scale, in harmony with the predictions of the 'balance theory'. Most importantly, however, the preference shift was permanent. After four months, the individuals surveyed still chose the T-shirt which differed from those selected by criminals (the difference standing at 9.15 points), although they no longer remembered anybody's valuations: neither their own nor those of criminals. What was observed in their brains was the stimulation of the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC); this area coincides with that sensitive to prize-winning. Thus the brain treats as rewarding not only agreeing with the liked individuals, but also disagreeing with the disliked ones.[11] This implies that favouritism bonds resulting from the in-group feeling lead to a durable change in cultural identity. This change, restoring the cognitive balance, constitutes a prize for the brain.

What do these experiments mean for museum education? They constitute a proof for the potential occurrence and mechanism of a durable change in ethical, aesthetical, cognitive, and alike preferences, potentially coming to existence in the course of an educational activity. They confirm the conviction shared by possibly all educators about the transformative character of their activities: the power of creating community bonds through museum education becomes objective.

The person participating in museum education conducted in a workshop format stands a chance of witnessing choices of individuals who are in the group with then, no matter whether this is a pre-school group, a students'

scientific circle, or an accidentally brought together party of individuals who purchased the tickets. This exposure to their axiology, usually lasting for two hours, potentially has a transformative power.

## Flowers and likes

A number of museum education activities thematize the confrontation of its participants with their preferences. Let me use the examples most at hand. One of the workshops conducted until the end of 2022 at the Museum of Art in Lodz was *Flowers or Squares?*[12] specifying aesthetical choices of an individual against a group. The meeting began on the middle level of the staircase of the ms² building at 19 Ogrodowa Street in Lodz: from there 41 steps lead both up and down. By stepping up or going down the participants voted in 41 micro-aesthetical choices when asked, e.g., '*Mona Lisa* or *Mona Lisa* with a moustache? If *Mona Lisa,* go up, if *Mona Lisa* with a moustache, step down', 'veduta or street art?', 'flowers or squares?'. The alternatives contrasted stereotypes of conservative and modern art. A consistent (or automatic) opting either for the first or the latter led respectively to the top or bottom of the staircase. From there it could be seen that at every stage of the workshop its group constituted an axiological continuum: almost everybody was standing on a different step out of the 83.

Subsequently, the participants created diagrams of their own aesthetical preferences. On a net of a hundred fields standing for 100 per cent of convictions they pasted icons of flowers and squares in the proportion and arrangement reflecting their choices. There were working definitions of art added to the diagrams. The ready boards were referred to museum exhibits, either straightforwardly or à rebours. The evaluation of this action served to discuss the bonds felt; in many a case one exhibit was connected with several boards, often of excluding senses.

The course of the *Flowers or Squares* workshop revealed identity of its participants in various ways: during the opinion survey on the stairs, in the form of icon diagrams, in the form of personal verbal definitions, and voices phrased in the debate. Each choice was transparent, and potentially challenged the identity of the participant shaking the 'cognitive balance'; the person or group I appreciate (or contrariwise) could manifest preferences different from mine (or vice versa). By revealing the participants' preferences towards art and towards one another, the workshop provoked a potential change of those preferences. At the same time the apparent 'triviality' of the form (statistical search with the use of stairs or squares) created a safe platform on which adversaries could safely dialogue using dissens.[13]

A similar platform was built in the workshop *Pins of the 20th and 21st Century*[14] taking the participants into the realities of the display of the dynamic of bonds created in social media. The participants were arbitrarily assigned a work from the Museum collection: it then appeared on their feed on the wall. Subsequently, the participants could comment on the work by adding a trivial prop to it: from swimming goggles to a teddy bear. The next step was the possibility to like a certain composition of items with the 'thumb-up' icon. It was possible to comment on somebody's 'like' on the sheet and then to like somebody's comment with another 'thumb-up'. Afterwards one could fake sharing the achieved collage of meanings with any public person who in the participant's opinion would appreciate it. Subsequently, the sharing could be liked, and the like and the sharing could be commented on, etc. Only time was the limit here.

*Flowers or Squares* and *Pins of the 20th and 21st Century* multiplied the confrontation of the identity of individuals, communities, and museums, leading to a potential change. Both scenarios thematized aesthetical preferences of its participants. This does not mean to say, however, that museum experience does not affect and transform other values: ethical, social, religious…I believe that every person dealing with museum education is proud of his or her axiological testimonies or even identity transformations in participants.[15]

## Relational education

Nicolas Bourriaud observes that *flags, logos, icons, and signs*, T-shirts, flowers, and likes have the power of bonding people. A museum exhibition, or more broadly, a museum as a place for displaying objects, constitutes a privileged space within which community bonds are created instantaneously.[16] Those interhuman entanglements, understood almost in Gombrowicz's manner, have ben thematized by art at least since the 1990s. Bourriaud defines that fragment of contemporary art as 'relational art'. Its part self-thematically reinterprets the bonds established precisely by the institutions of the world of art, yielding prototypes of new formulas of invitation, audition, visit, public space, encounter.[17]

Relational art is usually perceived as a form of institutional criticism, revision of the petrified division into the object of art (or more broadly: a musealium), the artist (or more broadly: the figure of the author), and the public.[18] I demand to extend this perspective. The reference horizon for 'relational' (or 'participatory') art should precisely be the experience of museum education. However, although the term 'educational turn' appeared already in the mid-1990s with reference to artistic activities which did not perceive *intersubjectivity and interaction in the categories of a fashionable theoretical gadget or an addition (alibi) to the traditional artistic praxis,* but as the crux of 'encounter' which *constitutes the artistic field and deepens its relational dimension,*[19] the activities of museum education strictly speaking which never considered 'intersubjectivity and interaction' to be a fashionable 'gadget' or 'alibi',[20] still go unnoticed by art critics, which is both incredible, and deplorable.

Neither relational or participatory art nor (and I treat them as one) the experience of relational-participatory museum education should be secondarily institutionalized as serving a somewhat egoistic reflection on museums' condition or on interdependencies among stakeholders in the field of art. If it is truly so that relational experiences form a 'crack' in the capitalist economy of effectivity,[21] we should rather observe benefits on the part of the individuals establishing bonds. Socially-responsible cultural education actions: those in the domain of art and in the museum domain, give the floor to participants for them not the speak about art or museum,

but for them to speak about themselves! A museum artefact is but a pretext to bond: with oneself, with others in the group, with the world around. Janusz Byszewski and Maria Parczewska openly spoke about it already 20 years ago.[22] It is high time we perceived museum education as relational education and its role in creating museum's identity, but first and foremost the role played in creating the identity of the individuals visiting it.

**Abstract:** The article discusses the complexity of identity, the interdependence of social and cultural identity, and their relationship with museum education. The Author emphasizes that an individual's identity is shaped both by their membership in a social group and the internalization of its cultural values. With respect to museums, institutional employment contributes to identity formation, while cultural identity stems from museum narratives. The Author analyzes individual identity as a manifestation of cognitive conservatism influenced by neurophysiological mechanisms.

The Author argues that museum education can play a significant role in transforming individual identity, especially by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and values. The research indicating the potential for lasting changes in preferences as a result of educational activities is cited. The Author highlights the importance of social bonds formed within the museum, and suggests expanding the perspective of relational art to include the experiences of museum education. Furthermore, it is also emphasized that museum education initiatives should not be viewed as tools for analyzing the museum institution but as opportunities for participants to express themselves and build connections with one another.

**Keywords:** identity, museum, conservatism, museum education, relational art.

### Endnotes

1   H. Tajfel, 'Experiments in intergroup discrimination', *Scientific American*, 223 (5, 1970), pp. 96-102.

2   J.C. Turner, 'Some current issues in research on social identity and self-categorization theories', in *Social Identity*, ed. by N. Ellemers, R. Spears, B. Doosje, Oxford 1999, pp. 6-34.

3   See P. Boski, K. Struś, E. Tlaga, 'Cultural identity, existential anxiety and traditionalism', in: *Ongoing Themes in Psychology and Culture. Proceedings from the 16th International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*, ed. by B.N. Setiadi, A. Supratiknya, W.J. Lonner, Y.H. Poortinga, Yogyakarta 2004, particularly p. 468.

4   See new ICOM museum definition from 2022: https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/ (Accessed: 8 Sept 2023).

5   See B. Herrnstein Smith, *Natural Reflections. Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion*, New Haven-London 2009, particularly p. 6.

6   L. Fleck, 'Powstanie i rozwój faktu naukowego. Wprowadzenie do nauki o stylu myślowym i kolektywie myślowym,' in: idem, *Psychosocjologia poznania naukowego. „Powstanie i rozwój faktu naukowego" oraz inne pisma z filozofii poznania*, ed. by Z. Cackowski, S. Symotiuk, Lublin 2006, pp. 28-163.

7   Th. S. Kuhn, *Struktura rewolucji naukowych*, trans. by H. Ostromęcka, afterword trans. by J. Nowotniak, Warszawa 2001.

8   S. Trapp, A. Shenhav, S. Bitzer, M. Bar, 'Human preferences are biased towards associative information', *Cognition and Emotion*, 6 (29, 2015), pp. 1054-1068.

9   S. Braem, S. Trapp, 'Humans show a higher preference for stimuli that are predictive relative to those that are predictable', *Psychological Research*, 83 (2019), pp. 567-573.

10  F. Heider, 'Attitudes and Cognitive Organization', *The Journal of Psychology*, 21 (1946), pp. 107-112.

11  K. Izuma, R. Adolphs, 'Social Manipulation of Preference in the Human Brain', *Neuron,* 3 (78, 2013), pp. 563-573.

12  *Flowers or Squares,* workshop by Leszek Karczewski which accompanied *The 20th and 21st- Century Art Collection* Exhibition, launched in 2011; the scenario used an episode of the *Kulturanek* programme, season II, episode 10  out of 12, produced in 2013 (script by Leszek Karczewski, Barbara Kaczorowska, directed by Artur Frątczak, produced by the National Audiovisual Institute, TVP Kultura, Museum of Art in Lodz).

13  On the role of dissens see L. Karczewski, 'Edukator, instytucja, twórczość', in: *Zawód: kurator*, ed. by M. Kosińska, K. Sikorska, A. Czaban, Poznań 2014, pp. 572-576.

14  *Pins of the 20th and 21st Century*, workshop by Agnieszka Wojciechowska-Sej, accompanying *The 20th- and 21st-Century Art Collection* Exhibition, launched in 2015.

15  I personally have shared e.g., the story of Marianna (fake name) placed at Special School No. 3 in Lodz. Her participation in the actions of the Education Department of the Museum of Art in Lodz led to her being given a job in fashion industry. L. Karczewski,  'Sztuka czy zupa. Społeczna odpowiedzialność edukacji muzealnej', *Muzealnictwo*, 56 (2015), particularly pp. 164-166.

16  N. Bourriaud, *Estetyka relacyjna*, trans. by Ł. Białkowski, Kraków 2012, pp. 44, 46.

17  Bourriaud makes a direct reference to Witold Gombrowicz. See ibidem, pp. 13-17, 47, 50, 78, see also the definition of relational aesthetics and art: ibidem, p. 148.

18  See C. Bishop, *Sztuczne piekła. Sztuka partycypacyjna i polityka widowni*, trans. by J. Staniszewski, Warszawa 2015, p. 19.

19  Ibidem, pp. 60, 76.

20  Here I am referring to Claire Bishop (see ibidem, p. 19) disputing with Bourriaud.

21  I am quoting Karl Marx's term after Bourriaud. Idem, op. cit. p. 45.

22  See J. Byszewski, M. Parczewska, *Projektowanie sytuacji twórczych*, Warszawa 2004, particularly p. 24. I have pointed to identical consequences of constructivist pedagogy in museum education. L. Karczewski, 'Od monologu do polilogu. Cztery formaty publikacji edukacyjnych', *Muzealnictwo*, 57 (2016), particularly pp. 223-224.

**Leszek Karczewski, PhS**

A lecturer at the Institute of Contemporary Culture of the University of Lodz; in 2008–2022, Head of the Education Department at the Museum of Art in Lodz: a theoretician of literature and theatre expert, museum curator, and culture educator. He created *Kulturanek*, an education programme for children, awarded with the Sybil Prize in 2012. In 2017–2019, member of the Programme Council of the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections, NIMOZ. Awarded with e.g., Decoration of Honour of 'Meritorious For Polish Culture'; leszek.karczewski@uni.lodz.pl

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