

Power *in* Museums *السلطة في المتاحف* Macht *in* Museen

By Giulia Russo

Power *in* Museums

Traditionally, museums have been attributed considerable power. This is due to their ability to tell stories and attract audiences, but also to the fact that museums are generally seen as reliable institutions and repositories of knowledge. In considering power in relation to museums, however, we should not focus only on the power *of* museums, as has often been done, but rather on the power *in* museums. I believe that knowledge of power *in* museums can be instructive in addressing and evaluating the question of power *of* museums. If the power of museums has more to do with its positive impact on society, we can all agree that such power can only be unleashed if the structures within the museum enable the realization of that mission. I will present some reflections and questions here.

Let's first consider the internal structure of a traditional museum in its hierarchies, be it in relation to different roles (archivist, cafeteria, cleaning staff, curator, director, intern, IT service, museologist, photographer, reception staff, registrar, restorer, shops, vice director, etc.) or contracts (voluntary work, internship, short-term, long-term). Who of all these people, and I am certainly forgetting other figures, has the power to speak – and to be heard – in museums? Or rather, how do these hierarchies hamper communication and participation within museum structures and decisional processes? And how do the socio-cultural, ethnic, and financial backgrounds of the museum staff reflect that of the society in which their museum is located? In short, how can museums offer or promote inclusivity in their internal organization – and thus be socially sustainable in the process?

If diversity is a fact and inclusivity is an act, then the question of inclusivity in museum structures is crucial. It is to be expected that a diverse, i.e., inclusive, professional environment in a museum will be more in touch with society and therefore select, research, and interpret topics and themes that are relevant to the public. In this intertwining of interpretation and relevance there is room for experimentation in co-curation and storytelling, involving voices that are not only normally unheard in museums but are actively silenced in society at large. Think of the poor, the elderly, women, the homeless, refugees and migrants, children, BiPOC (Black, indigenous, People of Colour), and the list goes on and on. We all know that people who have traditionally been marginalized face infinite barriers to participating in society and in its decision-making process. Now, if we think of the museum as a small society unto itself, how can internal barriers be broken down to allow for a more direct, equal encounter between museums' people, from cleaning staff to curators? That is, how can museums shape their internal structures in such a way that they form a community in which all members are granted full participation, where they know each other and are comfortable enough to exchange ideas, problems, and desires?

This brings me to another important point: the financial question. Staff in museums are first and foremost *people*. If their salaries are not commensurate with the economic context in which they live, and with their time and commitment to their work, how can the dignity of their lives and of their work be ensured? And is it then possible to create and maintain a productive, creative, and inspiring work environment? The financial question is not only related to the wages of the staff, but is a more pervasive problem, manifested in many museums by the almost constant lack of funds to organize exhibitions or to maintain and renovate the existing ones. The question of power *in* (and, as a result, *of*) museums is primarily a financial question. Museums are public institutions that provide education and knowledge to practically everyone. As such, they *must* rely on adequate

financial resources. The crucial point is by whom and how these resources are provided, and how they are distributed and used between and within museums and their internal departments and employees. The independence, trustworthiness and transparency of museums and their staff, especially research staff, are at stake here. Transparency is central to every step of museum practice. To ensure this, the work and ethics of museums should be regularly evaluated by external experts to determine whether and how the museum is fulfilling its mission and potential for improvement is identified.

Finally, power is inevitably linked to change. One must have the power to initiate or prevent change, that is, to resist it. In the space in between, there is room for the delicate dance of negotiation. In this sense, a fundamental aspect of power is its intrinsic relationship with knowledge. In our case, the knowledge that museum professionals have about their institution and its internal structures, and ultimately about their museum's mission. And when that knowledge is translated into practice and action, the time will have finally come for museum people to challenge and undo existing, obsolete museum power structures.