

# Can the Museum Be an Agent of Social Change? A New Model of the Functioning of the Museum in the Twenty-First Century

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*Muzeologia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2023, 11:3:23-35  
doi: 10.46284/mkd.2023.11.3.2

## *Can the Museum Be an Agent of Social Change? A New Model of the Functioning of the Museum in the Twenty-First Century*

A large group of scholars believe that, in the face of an increasing awareness of global challenges, the mission, role, values and responsibilities of museums as institutions require radical rethinking and transformation. In 2016, at an ICOM conference, Mário Moutinho suggested that the category of new museology be broadened towards sociomuseology as a school of thought, whose task is to integrate efforts to adapt museum structures to the present-day reality, to achieve a new level of autonomy for museums, and to open museums to the social context. The philosophical basis for this movement is the idea of participation, and its goal is to create a network of institutions, communities and individuals whose objective is sustainable local development. This approach to museum activism means modifying the tasks the museum undertakes as a civic institution, and the new model of its operation is aimed at real political, social and environmental change. The concept has met with criticism from researchers and museologists who believe that the museum should preserve its identity and focus on its traditional tasks. By giving examples of similar activity conducted by some Polish historical museums the author offers answers to the question of whether and to what extent museums in the twenty-first century can and should adopt this new model in order to truly influence their environment while, at the same time, preserving the functions of an institution whose role is to protect national heritage.

Keywords: museum activism, participation, social change, historical museums

Museums, as specific reservoirs of ways of representing past events, are a key element in the processes of rationalisation and institutionalisation of history and contribute significantly to the development of professions that provide trust-based services. It is they that legitimise and interpret the past for the visitors, while their wide impact and social authority make them jointly responsible for the shape of collective memory. At the same time, the public character of exhibitions means they reflect contemporary tensions between wide access and elitism, popular knowledge and expert knowledge, the conferral of significance and the casting doubt upon it, and also between the market value of an exhibition and its mission.

From the perspective of contemporary analyses, museums are often perceived as institutions that instil specific values and serve the needs of the state and the dominant interest groups within it. On the basis of Michel Foucault's theory, which interprets cultural practices in terms of the growing regulation of culture by the state through knowledge–authority discourses, some scholars treat museums as a combination of historical structures and narratives, exhibition practices and strategies, as well as interests and imperatives of various (ruling) ideologies. In

their studies they strive to expose structures, rites and procedures, as well as relations occurring between objects and ideological processes of persuasion.<sup>1</sup>

At present, however, the museum as an institution is undergoing multifaceted transformations that arise not only from the emergence of technologically advanced solutions applied at exhibitions but also, and primarily, from socio-cultural changes which introduced debates over the functions and tasks of cultural institutions in the twenty-first century. Public institutions have to attract visitors, identify their expectations and meet them. If they are expected to provide an environment that actively influences the ways people perceive past events, they have to vividly respond to the demands of the present. Museums are increasingly becoming institutions aimed at serving their communities, focusing their interest on the most pressing problems and ideas of the present time: Lord Gail Dexter calls them “civil society institutions.”<sup>2</sup> The presentation of knowledge is not, and has never been, the only duty of museums. As tools of civic education they have always exercised didactic functions. Currently, this means developing the ability to think critically and to use knowledge, with the aim of enabling museum visitors to make conscious and justified decisions.

With the establishment of new museum institutions, there has been a growing interest in museums from the perspective of theoretical conceptions. Increasingly, the scientific press and periodicals publish articles that analyse in depth both particular exhibitions and (at a more advanced level) theoretical museological categories. Topics that not long ago were of interest only to a small group of museologists have now become widely commented on by journalists, historians, politicians, and, finally, by the broader visiting public.

A response to the foregoing phenomena was the paradigm of “new museology” that suggested that museums should go beyond traditionally conceived functions and focus on communication with the public and support for local communities.<sup>3</sup> An attempt to correct the museological course was also proposed by Robert R. Jones, who advocated putting the concept of “mindful museum” into practice. In works published in 2009 and 2010, Jones observed that most museums largely avoid deeper social involvement both from the ethical and practical angle. Consequently, these institutions become prisoners of free-market imperatives and their own internal programs. In this context, “mindfulness” denotes asking fundamental questions about the overriding goal of museum activism in the broader context. The collection, preservation and interpretation of objects should, he argued, become means to more comprehensive ends and, specifically, to the rejection of market ideology and achievement of more fundamental values – not in the form of successive levels of perfection and professionalism but by increasing the degree of active involvement with the surrounding world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: SHERMAN, Daniel J and ROGOFF, Irit. Introduction: Frameworks for Critical Analysis. In: Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (eds.) *Museum Culture. Histories – Discourses – Spectacles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992; KOLARIKOVÁ, Veronika. The museum exhibition in the context of dispositive analysis. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 10(3), 2022, pp. 5–31; ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK, Anna. *Historia w muzeach. Studium ekspozycji Holokaustu*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> LORD, Gail Dexter. Museum as Social Institutions. In Barry Lord, Gail Dexter Lord and Lindsay Martin (eds.), *Manual of Museum Planning: Sustainable Space, Facilities, and Operations*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2012, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> MAYRAND, Pierre. The new museology proclaimed. In: *Museum*, 148, 1985, p. 201,

<sup>4</sup> JANES, Robert R. *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 147–169; JANES, Robert R. The Mindful Museum. In: *Curator, The Museum Journal*, 53, 2010, pp. 325–338.

In 2016, at an ICOM (International Council of Museums) conference, Mário Moutinho proposed that the above-mentioned categories be broadened and proposed that the new museology be understood as a movement, a philosophy and a school of thought. He termed the whole concept “sociomuseology” or “new museology” in its mature form. It is the task of sociomuseology, as a school of thought, to integrate efforts to adapt museum structures to the present-day reality, to achieve a new level of autonomy for museums as institutions, and to open museums to the social context, with the idea of participation as the philosophical basis. The purpose of the movement is to create a network of institutions, communities and individuals aimed at sustainable local development.<sup>5</sup>

The concepts of the “mindful” museum and sociomuseology were eventually combined and expanded by Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, who, in their 2019 book, used the category of museum activism in the sense of the development of museum practice based on ethical values and argued for bringing actual political, social and environmental values into the picture. According to the two scholars, in the face of the growing awareness of global challenges, the mission, role, values and duties of museums require radical rethinking and transformation. In this vision, museums should become institutions that provide their communities with tools of “intellectual self-defense” against manipulation and management conducted in the interest of the dominant political or economic goals. Activism also denotes resistance, or, as the two scholars see it, a critical challenging and redefining of the status quo.<sup>6</sup> Museums are not guilty of causing social inequalities, yet they cannot remain indifferent to the problem of shaping the political conditions in which all social groups can be guaranteed equal rights, or at least the possibility of their enforcement. Janes and Sandell call reflection and active measures in this direction a moral imperative of the museum as a civic institution.<sup>7</sup> In these circumstances, the two scholars use the term “immorality of inaction”, since, they believe, inaction is incompatible with the ethical obligations of museums, or even immoral.<sup>8</sup>

The museum can also perform the function of an early warning system. Global social problems do not arise suddenly; there are many warning signs that turn into crises after some time. Even if museums are not able to contribute to solving global problems, they can help create the picture of the desired future for themselves and their community. This is always the first and indispensable step towards carrying out a recovery plan. The position of museums is exceptional in this case: their activity combines knowledge, the perspective of time and social authority.<sup>9</sup> This kind of museum would be a temporary institution necessary for the formulation and presentation of a new narrative that can challenge myths and mistaken notions, reverse expansionist tendencies, end rampant consumption and halt the destruction of the planet.

The expansion of the museum mission and the adoption by museums of the function of a social justice advocate did not meet with universal approval from all museologists. Chet Orloff, a history professor and museologist from Portland, Oregon, in his commentary on the debates at the 2016 ICOM Conference, criticised the argument about the need for museums to actively

<sup>5</sup> MOUTINHO, Mário, *From New museology to Sociomuseology*. 24th General Conference of the International Council of Museums in 2016. Accessed June 14, 2020 [http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/minisites/camoc/PDF/Newsletters/Minom\\_02.pdf](http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/camoc/PDF/Newsletters/Minom_02.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> JANES, Robert R. and SANDELL Richard. *Posterity has arrived: The necessary emergence of museum activism*. In: Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (eds.), *Museum Activism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, p. 1 and 6.

<sup>7</sup> JANES, SANDELL, *Posterity...*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 14–17.

intervene to advocate for social justice. He felt that although the museum should be a partner of other institutions working towards this direction, it would be a mistake to abandon the essential mission – to collect and preserve cultural heritage – in order to become, instead, “an agent of change”.<sup>10</sup> He regarded this tendency as risky and beneficial in the short-term at best, resulting in the reduction of other important services that museums provide to their communities.<sup>11</sup> A permanent change requires resources and capabilities that most (especially small) museums do not have. Nor can it be assumed that museum personnel will, in addition to education in history, art history, etc., have the requisite knowledge and competence in psychology, sociology, political science or spatial planning.<sup>12</sup>

Institutional changes needed for the transformation of the historical role of museums from institutions whose job is to gather and preserve artefacts and collections into institutions involved in improving social life are, likewise, not a simple matter. According to Elizabeth Wood and Sarah A. Cole, the main difficulties are: 1) the lack of knowledge of or understanding the needs and situation of a local community; 2) privileged points of view preventing museum professionals from identifying problems that the museum can solve; and 3) the lack of a strong definition of social justice.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the organisational structure, the basic proposition is to give up corporate management hierarchy – where great authority and responsibility is held by one person (usually the director of the institution) – in exchange for granting increased autonomy to the employees. Museum activism promotes shared authority because it expects museum personnel to be ready to bear moral responsibility for supporting ethical issues, as well as to display flexibility and openness with regard to ways of cooperating with the public that build relationships and strengthen networks outside the museum, thereby supporting broader efforts for change.<sup>14</sup>

Museum personnel also share a widespread conviction that they have to protect their neutrality to avoid falling victim to prejudices, trends and interest groups, and to preserve the authority of the institution. Sometimes the duty of maintaining objectivity is also mentioned. Although faith in the possibility of achieving true objectivity has substantially weakened in recent years, a similar attitude (or at least the act of seeking to achieve it) is still valued, because museum practitioners believe they have the ability to bring museum audiences closer to the truth. They are afraid to lose their credibility by openly advocating a specific standpoint.

It is worth asking at this point what museum neutrality would actually entail. If we look to the dictionary definition and treat neutrality as “an impartial attitude towards other people’s affairs, other people’s disputes, impartiality, indifference”,<sup>15</sup> then it is obvious that no museum is neutral and none could be. Robert Janes regards the conviction about “authoritative neutrality” as a fallacy, while neutrality, he believes, is actually an ideology made up of a set of ideas, judgments and values that justify and conceal the specific interests of some social groups. By identifying themselves as ideologically neutral spaces for debate and representation, museums in actual fact position themselves on the margins, justifying their passivity by the fact that they

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<sup>10</sup> ORLOFF, Chet. Should museums change our mission and become agencies of social justice? In: *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 60(1), 2017, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> WOOD, Elizabeth Wood and COLE, Sarah A. Growing an activist museum professional. In: *Museum activism*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>14</sup> JANES, SANDELL, *Posterity...*, p. 9

<sup>15</sup> SZYMCAK Mieczysław (ed.). *Słownik Języka Polskiego* [Polish Dictionary], Vol. II. Warsaw: PWN, 1988, p. 316.

do not have resources or knowledge to take up new or controversial issues.<sup>16</sup> Concern for the so-called neutrality of museums negates a broader vision of their activity and a chance to achieve their true potential.<sup>17</sup>

Sandra L. Rodegher and Stacey V. Freeman observe that neutrality taking the form of inaction is not only non-neutral but also has negative consequences. Although the intention may be pure, empirical studies show that inactivity is an action that assesses a particular approach to a problem. Out of the possible attitudes museums can adopt, they distinguish three that they term “feigned neutrality, advocacy and activism”. Feigned neutrality involves keeping museum visitors convinced that the museum presents only facts and reports information covering the area of expert knowledge of specific facts. Advocacy involves sharing knowledge and, at the same time, indicating challenges and offering space for reflective dialogue. It is an attempt to answer the question of what can be done in a given case; the museum does not avoid taking a stand on the issues in which it specialises and is able to offer professional expertise. Activism involves raising a problem and showing clear and direct ways of solving it.<sup>18</sup>

It should also be pointed out that with the growing consciousness of global (but also local) threats, social requirements will inevitably change. The broad public may expect all cultural institutions to become involved in the issues crucial to the present. There is also a growing pressure to make it possible to participate in museum activity. To maintain feigned neutrality may prove contrary to society’s expectations of museums.

Discussion of the importance of museums and their influence on society also includes the idea of museums as components of networks or systems that are connected through objects, images and information. Robert Janes speaks of the cluster concept and envisions the “ecology” of museums, which he defines as a wide network of social relationships necessary for enhancing the importance and even survival of these institutions.<sup>19</sup> Looking at the museum as part of a network changes the lens through which we define an organisation. Objects and specific histories are valuable and unique but a network lens shifts the focus to the museum’s social potential. As a museum develops relationships with other network members, it also develops the ability to group together a range of other actors who can support and assist initiatives beyond the reach of individual organisations. The museum’s capacity to connect with a wide range of institutions that share a common subject matter supports and enhances its authority in linking actors whose objectives may seem far removed from the museum’s mission. Ultimately, the museum becomes crucial both to the network and to the development of initiatives aimed at solving complex problems, by pointing to unused resources and seeing capability where others fail to see it.<sup>20</sup>

An example of this is the Leadership Divisions programme conducted by Washington’s Holocaust Museum, addressed to leaders and specialists (including military), law enforcement agencies, the judiciary and students whom the museum defined as persons or institutions with authority and bearing responsibility for preserving and protecting the values of democratic

<sup>16</sup> In the case of American museum, the issue is most often the interests of private sponsors, because museums are increasingly dependent on corporate and private funding. JANES, *Museums in a Troubled World...*, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> JANES, SANDELL, *Posterity...*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> RODEGHER Sandra L. and FREEMAN Stacey Vicario. Advocacy and activism. A framework for sustainability science in museums. In: *Museum Activism*, pp. 341–344.

<sup>19</sup> JANES, *The mindful museum...*, p. 333.

<sup>20</sup> McCANN, Marcy. Activist practice through networks. A case study in museum connections. In: *Museum Activism*, p. 221 and 227.

society. The programmes combine issues central to the Holocaust Museum's mission, contemporary values and challenges and deal with such matters as the role and duties of citizens in a democratic society, the proper use of power, and tensions between the rights of an individual and public security.<sup>21</sup>

My own studies on historical museums in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe show that museums can no longer be regarded as places that represent the past as it really was; nor can they be perceived as repositories of knowledge in which progressive and cumulative efforts of their personnel add up to a better understanding of the human world and the natural one. They are not privileged places, they do not explain anything because they themselves need explaining: they are social constructs full of action and interaction. Museums create cultural expressions (e.g. exhibitions); they are active in creating knowledge, these creations being, however, a product rather than a discovery.<sup>22</sup> Museums offer opportunities and potential for discovering their own conceptual order, and even for reversing or criticising it: they are institutions capable of reflecting on their status and identity, as well as contesting specific knowledge–authority discourses. They are therefore certainly not places that can be defined by their objects and collections alone. They do not always, however, use their critical potential. Regrettably, they often shape their priorities in accordance with a top-down demand for a particular narrative, become involved in political battles, or confirm the hierarchy of values in a particular historical moment. Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries are still undergoing transformation and analysing the events of the past. The societies of the former Eastern bloc also have greater need for self-identification and the creation of integrative narratives compared to the stabilised Western democracies, hence museum narratives in these countries often focus on filling in the blanks in the recent communist past or commemorating events connected with the struggle to regain full sovereignty.<sup>23</sup>

The elements of museum activism are seldom found in Polish museum practice. Hierarchically managed and traditional (despite a sometimes attractive form of presentation), Polish institutions mostly refuse to expand on their basic mission and become involved in current affairs. There are, however, examples of institutions that are setting new trends in Polish museology. The three cases discussed below are all museums that are concerned with a difficult past whose acceptance is still a challenge to a large part of Polish society even today.

### POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw

In 2013, owing to the trilateral agreement between the then Polish government, Warsaw's municipal government and a non-government organisation (Jewish Historical Institute Association), POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews was opened. The building, designed by Rainer Mahlamäki and recipient of multiple awards, was erected in the centre of the former Jewish quarter (known as Muranów district today), in which Nazi Germans established a ghetto during World War Two. The permanent narrative exhibition tells the history of the thousand-year-long presence of Jews in Polish territory. The exhibition emphasises the positive elements of the shared Polish–Jewish legacy, but the authors did not omit the difficult and painful issues known to history researchers. Neither the pogroms by nor collaboration of

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> PEARCE, Susan. *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, p. 258.

<sup>23</sup> ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK, Anna. Musealisation of communism, or how to create national identity in historical museums. In: *Muzeologia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo* 8(4), 2020, pp. 59–72.

some members of Polish society with German Nazis during World War Two were “forgotten”. POLIN museum continues to actively respond to current controversial matters.

One example of such activity is the temporary exhibition opened on the 50th anniversary of the March 1968 events. The term “March 1968” refers to a social and political crisis in Poland that began in June 1967, reached its height between 1967 and 1968, and came to an end in late summer 1968. The most important elements of the crisis were acute factional struggle within the ruling Polish United Worker’s Party (PZPR), a social crisis resulting from disappointment with shrinking civil liberties and democracy following the major transformations of 1956, and finally, the use by the authorities of anti-Semitic stereotypes and prejudices, which resulted in the largest anti-Semitic campaign in post-war Europe after the Stalinist purges of the 1950s, and led to the mass emigration of the remainder of Jewish community from Poland.

By using artefacts, pictures, documents and films from the period, the exhibition *Obcy w domu. Wokół marca* (Estranged. March ’68 and Its Aftermath) showed the Jewish experiences of March 1968 and its consequences, especially the forced emigration of thousands of people.<sup>24</sup> In accordance with its intended objectives, the exhibition referred to universal experiences – in this case, the existential fear associated with the loss of the sense of security. A story was presented about the stigmatisation, uprooting and exile experienced by approximately 13,000 Polish Jews who were expelled from their homeland.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition also highlighted the media campaign of hatred that accompanied those dramatic events. It thus produced a critical image of Polish society and a population which was mostly indifferent to acts of aggression directed at their fellow citizens.

From the perspective of the paradigm of museum activism, what is important is that the curators of the exhibition, Justyna Koszarska-Szulc and Natalia Romik, referred to the current political situation and devoted the final part of the exhibition to hate speech in the comments found at the time on Internet portals and in popular right-wing media. A section of the display *Nowomowa i ciąg dalszy* (Newspeak and Continuations) presented titles, headlines and excerpts from texts and tweets published in connection with a current diplomatic conflict between Poland and Israel, in the aftermath of an amendment, forced by the Institute of National Remembrance, to a statute stipulating fines or imprisonment for anyone who attributed “to the Polish nation or Polish state the responsibility or joint responsibility for the crimes committed by the Third Reich”.<sup>26</sup> The exhibition in POLIN Museum allowed the visitors to compare two seemingly different situations that produced similar results. The anti-Semitic comments of 2018 were strikingly similar to those of 50 years ago. The exhibition, by showing the dramatic effects of passivity in the past, confronted the visitor with the present-day problem of the failure to respond to and to combat hate speech. Confronted with the question how a member of civil society should behave in such circumstances, each visitor had to answer it for themselves; the museum, however, took a clear stand, abandoning the stance of feigned neutrality.

A similar subject was reflected in a joint project between POLIN Museum and Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek. The two institutions invited museum practitioners from all over Poland, as well as individuals interested in cooperating with local communities, to take part in the museum thinktank

<sup>24</sup> STOLA, Dariusz. Pół wieku po marcu. In: Koszarska-Szulc, Justyna and Romik Natalia (eds.), *Obcy w domu. Wokół marca ’68* (exhibition catalog). Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, 2018, pp. 8–9.

<sup>25</sup> KOSZARSKA-SZULC, Justyna, ROMIK. *Obcy w domu*. In: *Obcy w domu*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> The statute was voted through, but the penalty of imprisonment was eventually rescinded. [www.wprost.pl/swiat/10135410/izraelski-dziennik-polska-wycofuje-sie-z-kontrowersyjnej-ustawy-o-holokaucie-rezygnujac-z-kary-wiezienia.html](http://www.wprost.pl/swiat/10135410/izraelski-dziennik-polska-wycofuje-sie-z-kontrowersyjnej-ustawy-o-holokaucie-rezygnujac-z-kary-wiezienia.html), accessed December 5, 202.

(established in 2014) devoted to the subject *Muzea i sąsiedztwo* (Museums and Neighbourhood). The project promoted museums' responsibility for their environment, and supported local activities, including activism and intervention. Activities included the temporary installation *Plot nienawiści* (The Fence of Hatred) in Muranów, which presented hate speech and slogans found in the public space of Polish cities, displayed from August to October 2015.<sup>27</sup> On the fence, one could discern slogans such as “*Łowcy Cyganów*” (Gypsy Hunters), “*Jude Raus*” (Jews out! [in German]) and “*Polska dla Polaków*” (Poland for the Poles), but reading them was not simple, because the fence bars were bent so as to make it difficult to decipher the inscriptions. An important role was played by the material from which the installation was made. Hubert Czeropok – the author of the installation – argued that:

to translate hate speech into one of the most difficult-to-machine materials, which is forged steel, is to work over it in a literal, physical way. The inscription so reworked is more durable, and more uncomfortable, more difficult to hide and ignore. That is why an important aspect is the materiality of this work. The installation is standing in the public space, adjacent to the spray inscriptions on the wall. It is thereby more difficult, bitter and embarrassing.<sup>28</sup>

These examples show that POLIN Museum maintains an activist attitude, using both exhibitions for this purpose and activities that are part of the basic, educational and expositional mission of the museum.

### Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum

Two of Poland's most important museums expand their mission with civic activity. Both are memorial sites associated with former German Nazi concentration camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum (in Oświęcim near Krakow) and the State Museum at Majdanek (in Lublin). They were both established in 1947 and have continued uninterrupted in their mission, which is to cultivate the memory of the victims of German Nazi crimes, to protect and conserve the camp relics, and to offer education in the broad sense, aimed at shaping the attitudes of visitors. The two museums, however, treat their mission in broader terms. Their activity goes beyond the representation of a difficult past, aiming at the same time to influence the present.

A clear example of this is the actions of Piotr Cywiński, Director of Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, in connection with the case of 13-year-old Omar Farouq, who was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment by a Nigerian Sharia court in September 2020 for blasphemy against Allah. After the verdict was announced, Cywiński wrote to Nigerian President Muhammad Buhari, asking him to pardon the boy. Moreover, he suggested that if granting the pardon proved impossible, he would assemble 120 adult volunteers, each of whom would voluntarily spend one month behind bars instead of the boy, and that he himself would be one of the volunteers. The essential element here is that Piotr Cywiński responded to Omar Farouq's case not as a private individual but as the director of an institution devoted to commemorating the victims of Nazi extermination. “As the director of the memorial site of children who were imprisoned and murdered, I cannot be indifferent to this sentence, which is an affront to humanity,” he

<sup>27</sup> See: <https://issuu.com/aleksandracybulska/docs/muzealny-thin-tank-muzea-sasiedztwo-3022021> accessed March 3, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/hubert-czeropok-plot-nienawisci>, accessed May 1, 2022.



wrote in his letter to the Nigerian president.<sup>29</sup> Thanks to this gesture, the case was widely publicised, with human rights defenders, lawyers, people from Poland and abroad (including Nigeria), and the media becoming involved. Ultimately, a secular court acknowledge that the sentence could not be served because Omar Farouq was underage and because he was not represented by a defence lawyer during the trial by the religious court.<sup>30</sup>

Piotr Cywiński understands the mission of the museum he directs in broader terms than curating the memory of past victims. To him, this memory makes sense only when it involves today's responsibilities. During the commemoration of Auschwitz's 75th anniversary, he noted that

today, almost everywhere, one can see old ghosts coming back to life. [...] Anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia are growing [...] in the gloom of re-emerging populism and demagoguery the ideologies of contempt and hatred are growing stronger, [while] we [...] are becoming increasingly indifferent, withdrawn, apathetic, and passive [...]. After the Holocaust our silence today is our heavy defeat, our own dehumanisation. Yes, precisely: self-dehumanisation.<sup>31</sup>

Another example is the international competition *Moja pamięć, moja odpowiedzialność. W moim miejscu* (My Memory, My Responsibility. At My Place) announced on February 14, 2022 to support socially-engaged attitudes and actions on a local level. The competition invites project proposals that refer to the history of Auschwitz, but also concern the present.<sup>32</sup>

The activity of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum is thus not limited to preserving a difficult legacy: it also fosters the creation of civic attitudes at a local and global level.

## The State Museum at Majdanek

The State Museum at Majdanek has expanded its traditional mission in a similar way. The institution recently began cooperating with the uniformed services in the Lublin region.<sup>33</sup> From 2015, in partnership with the Provincial Police Headquarters in Lublin, it has been organising historical–educational seminars devoted to the subject of the perpetrators of crimes during World War Two. The first group to take part in the workshop *Sprawcy z obozu na Majdanku. Zwyczajni ludzie czy fanatyczni mordercy?* (Perpetrators from the Majdanek Camp. Ordinary People or Fanatical Murderers?) were human-rights leaders and press officers of Lublin Province's police garrison. The participants learned about the history of the concentration camp in Lublin, broadening their knowledge of the psychology of the perpetrators and the crimes committed for ideological, racist and xenophobic reasons. The discussion on the question of why ordinary people perpetrate mass murders pertained not only to historical subjects but also to current issues connected with offences motivated by hate speech and contemporary racism.

<sup>29</sup> WANTUCH, Dominika, *Proponował, że odsiedzi wyrok za 13-latkę. Dyrektor Muzeum Auschwitz uratował chłopca przed nigeryjskim więzieniem*, <https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,26712528,proponowal-ze-odsiedzi-wyrok-za-13-latka-dyrektor-muzeum-auschwitz.html>, accessed February 2, 2022

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> SENKOWSKA, Nadia, SZAFRAŃSKI, Marek. *Piotr Cywiński: gorsza od zapomnienia jest pamięć, która nie rozbudza moralnego niepokoju*. <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/piotr-cywiniski-gorsza-od-zapomnienia-jest-pamiec-ktora-nie-rozbudza-moralnego-niepokoju> accessed February 2, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.auschwitz.org/muzeum/aktualnosci/miedzynarodowy-konkurs-moja-pamiec-moja-odpowiedzialnosc-w-moim-miejscu-2277.html> accessed February 4, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Review with Jolanta Laskowska, Head of Education Department of the Majdanek Museum, conducted on April 2, 2022.

Educational classes on the perpetrators offered by the State Museum at Majdanek were also an opportunity to reflect on modern crime prevention and the prevention of hate crimes.

The following year (2016), similar educational classes were held for police officers of Lublin Province garrison, including those from criminal investigation departments. As part of the programme, they visited Majdanek Museum, explored historical exhibitions, and learned about the fates of the Nazis' victims, based on video accounts. The focus of interest was analysing the biographies of perpetrators from the former Majdanek concentration camp in their historical, social and psychological context. The participants anonymously shared their reflections:

“This type of training is valuable because it shows how easy it is to go beyond the limits of our own behaviour.”

“Very good training. It made me think a lot about my conduct.”

“Interesting classes; they allowed me to look at my work from a different perspective.”

“A useful meeting, mainly to reflect on my own decisions and my approach to other people.”

“The classes directly made me realise how particular individuals may behave under the influence of ideology, propaganda, and the sense of impunity.”

These remarks prove that the participants easily associated the historical content with their own professional experience.

Somewhat different remarks were expressed in 2019 by participants in the same workshop, held as part of a one-day study visit by legal trainees, judges and prosecutors from Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Romania and Germany – members of the European Judicial Training Network AIACOS and the National School of the Judiciary and Public Prosecution in Krakow and Lublin. In this case the participants expressed reflections from a more universal perspective:

“We have to protect human rights and never stop defending freedom and equality.”

“Every single person can make a difference: the importance of being autonomous and human.”

“Remind yourself everyday to fight the beast in you and to water the flowers you carry in you instead.”

“I think it was also the conclusion of the workshop – a critical mirror was given to us...”

“I cannot accept the fact that human beings did these things to other human beings; I am afraid to understand the reason.”<sup>34</sup>

In 2017 the State Museum at Majdanek entered into an agreement with the Regional Inspectorate of Prison Service (OISW) in Lublin to cultivate the memory of and develop historical education about German occupation in the Lublin Region among Prison Service personnel and prisoners. The museum conducted training and education activities aimed at Prison Service officers and civil servants, as well as selected groups of prisoners. As part of the agreement, meetings, exhibitions, lectures and other initiatives were organised for prisoners who, having acquired historical knowledge about World War Two, were encouraged to develop empathic attitudes supporting the process of social reintegration. Educational workshops and classes were also organised for the inmates of the Opole Lubelskie Penitentiary. The first course, *Historia ukryta w fotografii* (History Hidden in Photographs), was held in 2017. The aim of the joint program developed by museologists and the Prison Service was to shape moral and social attitudes in prisoners by teaching them about the history of Majdanek. The educational classes were based on the exhibition *Majdanek w fotografii Edwarda Hartwiga* (Majdanek as Photographed

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<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Jolanta Laskowska, Head of Education Department of the Majdanek Museum, for making the materials available to me.

by Edward Hartwiga) and were attended by 30 inmates. The workshop began by presenting the documentary *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w Lublinie* (Majdanek. A Concentration Camp in Lublin). The historical narrative of the former Majdanek concentration camp was told through black-and-white photographs taken by the famous photographer Edward Hartwig at the site of the museum. These works generated many questions about the past and reflections on the present among participants.

In 2019, a group of prisoners took part in another workshop on history presented through the graphic novel *Chleb wolności* (Freedom Bread). The modern and unconventional source, published by the Majdanek Museum's Publishing Department, familiarised participants with the history of the former concentration camp at Majdanek and of the people incarcerated there. The pictures enabled them to engage more deeply with that difficult past and the struggle of the victims who were trying to survive and preserve their dignity – and also with those whose dignity and humanity was crushed by the Nazi Regime. In addition to imparting knowledge, the diverse subject matter covered in the classes for prisoners aimed at encouraging self-reflection and invited participants to ponder present day analogies and their own choices.

## Conclusions

All three examples considered here – POLIN Museum, Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, and the State Museum at Majdanek – illustrate the institution's systemic thinking. All three museums accept that they do not operate in a vacuum but exist within the broader social, cultural and political environment. Being open to these environments makes the museum more significant – it does not focus on itself but becomes inclusive and participatory.<sup>35</sup> The projects undertaken in collaboration with other institutions combine the history represented by each specific museum with the present-day challenges facing the community. In this way, each of these projects implements the principles of museum activism.

The term “activism” is semantically burdened, associated with energetic or even intense actions aimed at change. However, as the foregoing examples show, activism can be understood in a broader context as striving for change, making an effort to promote reform or, at least, demonstrating a desire to introduce improvements in various social spheres.<sup>36</sup> They show us that activism – seen as striving for positive improvements in society – does not require revolutionary transformations in the traditional mission of the museum, but simply the competent use of museums' existing cultural capital.

The need for change is not a new situation for museums. Institutions connected with diverse forms of rationality and power, as well as with popular culture, have evolved over recent centuries from elitist collections evidencing the dominance of imperial rulers and nation-states, through educational institutions for the general public, to spaces of multi-sensory experience – a form of entertainment for the consumer society.<sup>37</sup> The current museum boom is the result of sociocultural changes brought by capitalism, such as the emergence of mass tourism, an increased amount of free time, the development of the consumer society, and the postmodern disruption of boundaries between high and low culture. Museums have become symbols of cultural and economic revitalisation; they are institutional symbols of cities and regions,

<sup>35</sup> JUNG, Yuha, LOVE, Ann Rowson. Systems thinking and museum ecosystem. In: JUNG, Yuha, LOVE, Ann Rowson (eds.), *Systems Thinking in Museums: Theory and Practice*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> VLACHOU, Maria. Dividing issues and mission-driven activism. Museum responses to migration policies and the refugee crisis. In: *Museum Activism*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>37</sup> See: WITCOMB, Andrea. *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

enhancing their image and attracting tourists.<sup>38</sup> Although they have never abandoned their mission of civic education, at present many museums are finding this more difficult to fulfil as they become increasingly dependent upon economic liberalism and its basis of consumption and pleasure.

However, we live in times of global threats, and the capitalist story of economic growth and free markets is beginning to crumble. Museum activism responds to the need for a new narrative based on the foundation of sustainability. Arguably, never more than now have we needed to realise the potential of museums as social and civic institutions.

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<sup>38</sup> For one of the harshest opinions on the entertainment dimension of museum institutions see: CLAIR, Jean, *Kryzys muzeów. Globalizacja kultury*, (trans from French by Jan Kloczkowski). Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009.

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