

# The evolution of museum practice; From object to performance and technology



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Date: January 2021



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## Introduction

There are in recent time a new emergence of performative museums, where museum exhibition design is highly in focus. Based on a new technological paradigm, museum practice has evolved into aiming for a modern audience and introduce new digital ways of mediating art works. Museum discourses are highly affected by digital content, and the museum visitor is invited to participate in a different interaction with the museal objects. Museums are nowadays more or less forced to adapt their practices in order to attract visitors, due to a decrease in visitors.

In this research paper, I will take a look at the evolution of museum practice through time and define three typologies within the evolution; the legislating museum, the interpreting museum and the performative museum. Furthermore, the paper will focus on the performative type of museum and give a suggestion as to why this development has occurred in contemporary society. Exemplifying this, I will use the museum L'Atelier des Lumières as a case study. Regarding this museum and topic I will examine the technological impact, and its consequences on how this type of museum interacts with its audience. This paper's research groundwork is distilled into the following question:

*How has the art museum developed in terms of museum practices and how has the new technological/performative ways of mediating museal objects changed the way it establishes an interconnected relationship between visitor and museal object?*

I find it interesting and worth examining how these new types of museums succeed to attract a relatively high number of visitors in comparison to more traditional and highly prestige museums. The reason as to why I find this topic relevant is the fact that some people don't hold high regards to the performative museum; when I first visited L'Atelier des Lumières I was highly entertained and found it to be a very satisfying museum experience. Some of the people I know reacted in a surprising way, when I told them, that I had visited the museum; they didn't consider it as a proper museum, because it did not actually exhibit any real objects or works of art. The interesting aspect of this occurrence is to find in societal development, especially in terms of how technology has impacted people and their relation to art. With this paper I would like to demystify the phenomenon of the performative museum and try to shed light upon the background and relevance of these types of museums.

## Methodology

As stated, I will start by establishing the theory of three different typologies of museum practices and outline the different practises in relation to its spectator; in what way has the museum practice in terms of mediation and conveyance changed modes since the 19<sup>th</sup> century? How do these practices affect the spectator's understanding of the exhibited objects?

Furthermore, the paper will introduce the museum L'Atelier des Lumières as a performative museum. This museum is an interesting example of a performative museum, because it has moved away from exhibiting actual objects of art and instead show complete digitalised versions of great works of art by broadly known artists. In this relation, the paper will examine how this type of technological mediation has changed or extended the museum narrative and the way the spectator establishes a meaningful interaction with the exhibition objectives.

Lastly, the paper will on the findings of the case study discuss performative museums in general. The discussion will include the notion of societal and technology-facilitated development, and touch on the aspect of interpreting this new museology in terms of consumerism and political economy.

I will make use of different academic papers that provide theories regarding the new performative museology, that is investigated in this paper.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is based on an academic paper by Valerie Casey, which she based on Jacques Lacan's concept of the Gaze and Stephen E Weil's work *A cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries into Museum and Their Prospects*. The theories will touch on notions of the term *the gaze* as analytic framework, the three evolving typologies, and the shift in degree of performance.

A museum acquires much social authority, and it is capable of controlling the way spectators perceive an object. This is a part of museum narrative and discourse. The exact placement or exact way of exhibiting an object creates the importance and validity of the object. In a museum objects are made into museal objects by contextualizing and carefully creating a discourse and a narrative around the objects. Curators do not only gather valuable objects, but they make them valuable by gathering them (Casey, 2003). In this way, museums have the authority or power to produce cultural knowledge obtained by spectators.

### The Gaze

I will briefly define the concept of the Gaze created by Lacan to further talk about the evolution of museum practice. Following is Casey's definition of the Lacanian term:

*“The Gaze is the act of involuntary participation in a culturally constructed, visual discourse where there is no unmediated, pure relationship between a Subject and the Object of its view.”* (Casey, 2003, p. 3)

The Subject-Object relationship is always conveyed by a *screen*, which in this case doubles as a collection of sign and signifiers given by a social custom that represent the object. Because of this the object can never be viewed directly. In relation to museology the screen is interpreted as the curatorship; the way objects are organized and mediated. It is all the information and the contextualization that creates cultural value for the spectator (ibid.). This prescribed meaning directs the spectators understanding of the object.

Another aspect of the Gaze is its so-called reversibility. According to Lacan *“the Gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.”* Whereas Casey proceeds to explain *“the Gaze has the effect of alienating the Subject through this reversibility”* (Casey, 2003, p. 4). The reversibility refers to the way the spectator, the Subject, is also being watched by the Object – this makes the spectator very self-conscious, which makes sure that it will live

up to appropriate social behavior. In this sense, the function of reversibility is self-regulating – the same applies to the phenomenon of the *Panopticon* created by Foucault as to critique power structures, and the central inspection principle by Jeremy Bentham. It is a persuasive and regulatory strategy in the museum discourse, that induce the visitor to maintain an adequate behavior, because it seems to be observed or *gazed at* by the object and *the screen*; the museum discourse.

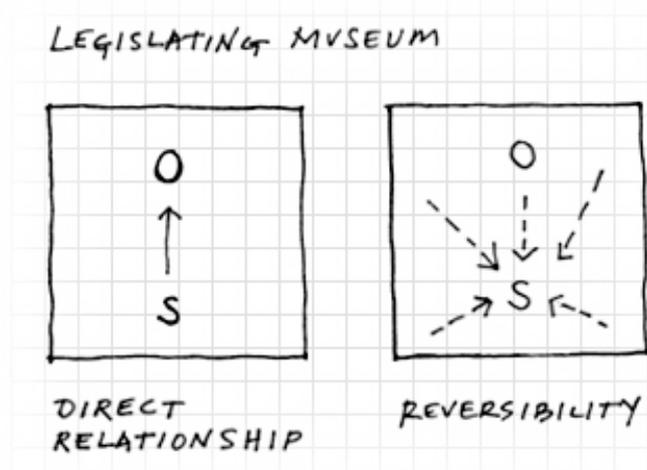
The idea of the Gaze is relevant in the outlining of the three major trends in museum practice. In the following the three typologies will be defined and examined in relation to its spectator.

## Museum practice typologies

Museum practice can be divided into three typologies; legislating museum, interpreting museum, and performative museum.

### Legislating museum

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century a museum was seen as a container for collections of objects. The museum would simply research and preserve different kinds of objects. It was a venue for display only, without further information provided. This practice created a distant relationship to the spectator. Casey has illustrated this function as following:



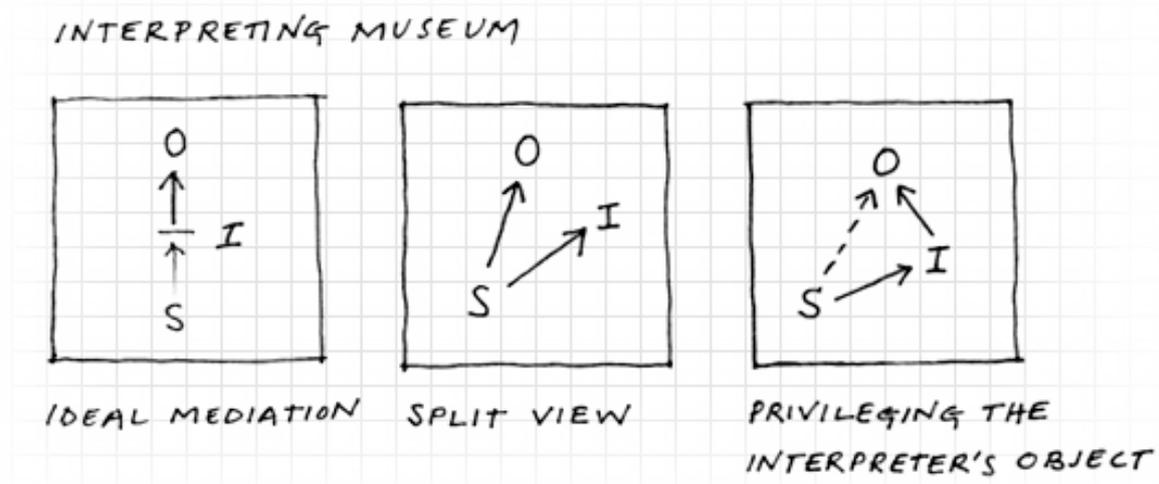
(Figure 1: Legislating museum diagram; Casey, 2003)

The left frame of the figure illustrates the direct relationship between the spectator and the object. Though the legislating museum does not provide mediation or information about the

displayed object, the museum is still an institution that connotes a social intervention, and at the same time the spectator is expected to hold some kind of cultural baggage, that intervenes in this direct relationship. The second frame of the figure illustrates the reversibility, as described earlier; the Subject is watched by the Object and the surroundings (Casey, 2003, p. 5). In the legislating museum the viewer is very aware that he is in a museum due to the museums institutional and authoritative effect, which makes him very aware and mindful about his behaviour. This museum-experience lived by the spectator lives up to the goal of the museum being an authoritative institution (ibid.)

### The interpreting museum

Casey describes the interpreting museum as being an evolution of the legislating museum, in the sense that the legislative aspect changed to being interpreting (Casey, 2003, p. 6). That means that the objects exhibited was now up for debate. The institution of the museum shifted from being authoritative to being open to new perspectives and interpretation. This was made possible through mediating information about the objects and creating narratives through organization of the objects and labels creating discourses. This type of museum practice structures a way for the spectator to understand and contextualize objects. Before, with the legislating museum, the objects would speak for themselves, but in the interpreting museum the objects are communicated and assigned a specific meaning, by for instance taking use of interactive media tools. Casey has illustrated this as followed:



(Figure 2: Interpreting museum diagram; Casey 2003)

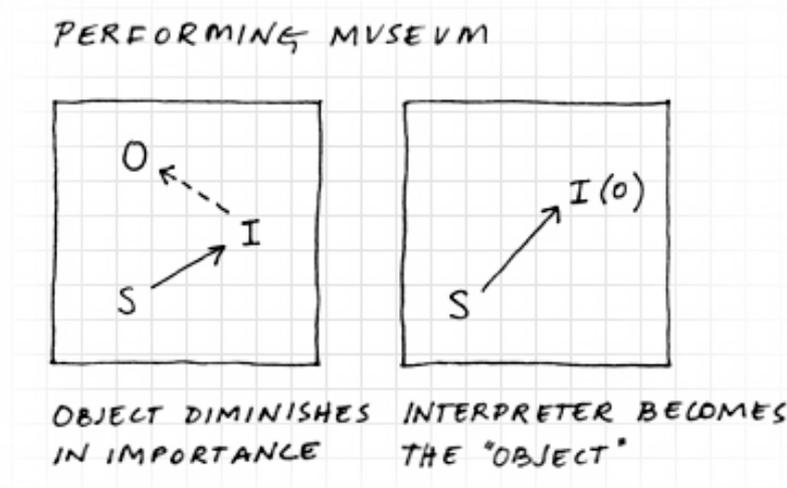
The first frame illustrates the ideal relationship between the spectator and object, where the relationship is strengthened by the information/interpretation provided. The relationship is still intact. But Casey proceeds to illustrate her propositions of what really happens to the relationship by applying this museum practice. In the second frame the spectator's attention is split between the object and the mediated information. This amplifies the effect of *the screen*, as defined earlier by Lacan. This results in the spectator grabbing most attention to the information/interpretation, as illustrated in the third frame. The direct relationship between the Subject and the Object is thus weakened (Casey, 2003, p. 7).

By changing the museum practice from being legislating to interpreting, the museum can function as a *cultural medium*. By taking objects into a museum for the purpose of display, one is ultimately taking a cultural object out of its original context and transforming it into a museal art object by organizing it in a new context, for visitors to view and understand. There is a strong focus on the visibility of the objects; the curation, narrative, discourse, information labels, pedagogic organisation, direction of the viewer's gaze, etc. Display and aesthetics value are rising in importance, which is foreshadowing the performative museum practice. (ibid.)

### **Performative museum**

As mentioned, the museum practice is developing from using objects as primary elements in exhibitions to being more attentive to the display of the objects. Furthermore, museums are struggling to compete with other tourist attractions, which have forced museums to prepare commercial strategies in order to attract visitors and at the same time provide efficient entertainment (Casey, 2003, p. 9). This aspect of the development will be further examined later in the paper.

In contemporary society museums are dealing with an experience-oriented audience. This has led to the focus of display rather than the actual objects, in the process of mediating culture and information (ibid.). As the interpreting began to take use of multimedia tools, the performative museum goes beyond that. We are now dealing with a so-called performative museology, that may completely digitalise certain objects of art, and use various technological tools to convey a narrative in the exhibition or museum. This has a clear effect on the already weak relationship between spectator and object, illustrated by the following figure:



(Figure 3: *Performing museum diagram; Casey, 2003*)

As the first frame indicates the object is diminished and almost completely dissolved, as the display, the interpretation, increases as most important element. The second frame indicates how the interpreter becomes one with the object; furthermore, the object is of less relevance than the interpretation (Casey, 2003, p. 10).

The evolution of museum practice has changed from being object-based to experience-based and focused on the display and interpretation, which the diagrams illustrate. The practice has undergone a type of de-materialisation; the objects are less important as the main conveyer of meaning, and instead the interpreters and organisers create displays that function as the central element in museum practice and in creating meaning and context for the spectator. Casey continues to describe how *"meaning is no longer intrinsically tied to the object, but instead created in the interaction between the viewer, the message, and the museum"* (Casey, 2003, p. 16). Museums are becoming more performative over time. She described how, in fact, they have always been performative; in the legislative museum practice the Subject was the performer, behaving a certain way, demanded by the object and the museum authority – according to Lacan's reversibility principle. In contemporary time, it is the museum that performs, not the spectator. What would be the object is instead produced by the museum by the use of technology, diminishing the actual object; the object is de-materialised.

## **Case study – L’Atelier des Lumières**

The case study of this paper is the French museum L’Atelier des Lumières located in Paris. I have visited the museum myself and seen two exhibitions, that showed works of Gustav Klimt and Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Attempting to avoid the bias of my own experience, the examination of the case study is based on the academic paper/thesis “*The Digital Art Centre: Experiencing Immersive Master’s Paintings at L’Atelier des Lumières*” by Anaïs Dos Santos.

### **Brief introduction**

The museum is located in a former foundry in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris and refurbished by Culturespaces. It is the second digital art centre in France and opened in 2018, and the museum holds 3.300 square metres surface onto 10-meters high walls (Santos, 2020, pp. 10–11). The museum displays famous paintings by broadly and well-known artists. The museum does not exhibit original paintings, nor replicas, instead it displays high-quality images of the paintings projected by 140 laser-video projectors. The exhibition provides an immersive experience, making the paintings come to life in complex video installations accompanied by composed music in spatialised sound systems. The projections are covering every inch of the large walls and surfaces, which emphasises a complete immersive experience. The inclusion of new technologies in the exhibition is a trademark of the museum practice of L’Atelier des Lumières and a comprehensive 360-degree visual universe is created.

### **L’Atelier des Lumières performs**

The museum is a textbook example of a performative museum. The museum reproduces famous art works, which means that the actual objects (the paintings) are diminished and in a sense less relevant in the relationship with the spectator in comparison to the importance of the display. The display is exactly the immersive experience that the museum provides. The museum uses cinematic techniques and tools that create a multisensorial experience. Techniques such as animation, montage and projection layering with voice-overs and

soundtracks that follow the reproduced paintings is immersing the visitor. Furthermore, the visitor is in control of their own viewing experience. Compared to the legislating and the interpreting museum where the practice separates the spectator from the object, l'Atelier des Lumières attempts to dissolve this separation. In an institutional museum (such as the legislating and interpreting) the narratives are clear; the spectator is a spectator in its literal sense; a static viewer looking at an object, and their path is organised carefully through a display of authority (Santos, 2020, p. 25). In institutional museums there are given high priority to preserving the artworks, which is exactly why there are such restrictions and carefully organised practices planned for the visitor. Furthermore, people today have the desire to immortalise their cultural experiences by documenting them and taking pictures. This leads to even further actions of precaution in order to preserve the artworks and objects. In opposition the visitor at l'Atelier des Lumières can choose their own path, while the ways of display do not require restrictions (naturally, due to the fact that they are projections). Trying to dissolve the separation between Subject and Object the visitor is invited to touch the walls of projection and they can discover the displays in their own pace. Of course, the attempt to dissolve the separation between the viewer and the artwork does not mean there is no interpretation or narrative set up by the curators. Visitor's experience is still highly guided; the projections of the paintings are carefully animated with the use of cinematic techniques and sound, that constrains the viewer to a certain pre-established experience (Santos, 2020, p. 26). Additionally, this museum practice does not allow the spectator to study the scope of details, that these paintings offer. But according to Culturespaces, l'Atelier des Lumières is an encouragement for visitors to seek the original paintings in a more institutional museum setting in order to learn more (ibid.).

As an extension of the museum narrative the museum has developed a phone application that offer original anecdotes on thirty major works from their exhibitions. On their website they advertise the application as such: "*Discover the masterpieces of this itinerant journey, from Impressionism to Modernism, in a fun and playful manner*" (Lumières, 2020). The museum narrative is further extended with technology, that also encourages visitors to learn more about the paintings. Not all visitors will make use of the application, but since there are no labels inside the exhibition space, the application tool could be an eligible replacement of them. The discourse of the words *fun and playful manner* indicates how they want to appeal to any kind of audience and increase the accessibility of the exhibitions and the artworks.

## Accessibility

As described, the museums like l'Atelier des Lumières are able to address a larger audience through their museum practice. People who might not be familiar with art are still able to connect with the displays of art in l'Atelier des Lumières. When the curators at l'Atelier des Lumières encourage the visitor to experience the paintings through their senses, it eliminates the need of any art knowledge beforehand. This is one of the main reasons why the museum and the mediation of the paintings are highly accessible in comparison to institutional museums that work legislative or interpreting. The entire setting of the museum encourages a close physical approach, that might make the visitor feel less restricted and intimidated as opposed to the traditional museum, where the discourses are set by distance, glass protection, and museum workers observing the visitor.

Furthermore, it is worth examining the notion of reproduced objects of art and their increased accessibility. In institutional museums that are either legislative or interpreting, the artworks are many times seen as mysterious or even holy. They also often impress because of the authority they hold (Santos, 2020, p. 14). Reproduced artworks on the other hand, being either on a phone, on the internet or at an exhibition in l'Atelier des Lumières, hold less authority and is perceived as more familiar (ibid.). L'Atelier des Lumières does not reflect any sort of authority due to the reproduction of the paintings. This makes them more approachable and accessible. The visitor has most likely already seen an image of for example Gustav Klimt's famous painting *The Kiss* on other various kinds of screens, which make the projected version of the same painting at l'Atelier des Lumières more familiar. Furthermore, Santos describes based on John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), that "*reproduction of an artwork increases its visibility by giving a large number of people access to it*" (Santos, 2020, p. 13). Thus, reproduced images are a big part of mainstream culture, which eliminates the authority and value of the (reproduced) object (Santos, 2020, p. 14). But because of the shift in museum practice and the focus on display value, the reproduced work of art obtains new functions, that reinstate its values (Santos, 2020, p. 15)

Earlier, artworks were according to Berger limited to the elite. The reproduction of famous paintings in a manner of practice by l'Atelier des Lumières art is no longer restricted to the elite, or the so-called cultured people exclusively. This does not mean that institutional museums only include people who have great knowledge of art, but the discourses of the museums generally make them less accessible to a broader audience than digital museums like l'Atelier des Lumières.

## A multi-sensorial and immersive experience

The discourse of l'Atelier des Lumières is the notion of the immersive experience. Having no restrictions as to what one is allowed to touch while simultaneously being surrounded by sounds and visuals the senses are stimulated in multiple ways. This allows the visitor to interact and emerge with the exhibition through an interconnected dialogue between visitor and display (Santos, 2020, p. 24). Being allowed to walk around freely in the open space, while having the possibility of blending in with the reproduced artworks adds an interactive element to the museum narrative; a physical dialogue that allows the visitor to engage emotionally with the display (Santos, 2020, p. 25). The narrative and the storytelling of the exhibitions and the display is used in order to encourage emotional engagement. The way the visitor can blend in with the panorama of art works eliminates boundaries, which facilitates the emotional engagement through a bodily experience. Thus, the experience at l'Atelier des Lumières is based on a physical and sensorial dialogue between the visitor and the paintings (Santos, 2020, p. 17).

The discourse of establishing an interconnected relationship between spectator and object – a physical dialogue making the spectator a part of the exhibition impacts the way the spectator makes meaning of the art; in terms of phenomenology, and bringing in philosophers such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, we find out that the body understands prior to the mind. According to Merleau-Ponty we are our bodies. Heidegger states that we perceive phenomena through our bodies before anything. We primarily experience our surroundings through our bodies (Santos, 2020, p. 18). Santos describes the way Merleau-Ponty explains the concept of bodily experience:

*“Merleau-Ponty states in his book Phenomenology of Perception (1945) that “we are our body” and consequently we experience our surroundings through it as “the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception” (ibid.).*

A sensorial experience, such as visiting l'Atelier des Lumières, will therefore manifest in the body of the visitor, if it grabs the possibility of engaging with the projections, and achieving an open perception of the multi-sensorial effects that the exhibitions provide. The experience that the visitor's body perceives is translated into the mind, and so the body becomes an important element in making meaning of performative and highly stimulating exhibitions like the once in l'Atelier des Lumières. When one perceives the world through its body, and becomes embedded into the world through experiencing it, it means that when a

visitor experiences an immersive art exhibition that stimulate multiple senses, the visitor becomes embedded also in the artwork. That is exactly what makes the narrative of l'Atelier des Lumières interesting in relation to meaning making for a broad audience, because it affects the visitor's consciousness through their body.

## Discussion

Technology-facilitated museums are rapidly emerging around the world in order to captivate a large audience. Today most types of museums have extended their museum narratives with technology in the forms of touchscreens and smartphone applications. This is done to create a bridge of further information to the object, in order all spectators to create meaning and contextualise the exhibited objects.

The following discussion will lay weight upon the technology-facilitated development in museum practice and investigate some possible reasons for it regarding societal matters. The discussion will touch upon how technology extends museum narratives and how performance and consumerism are related in this context.

### The new technological generation

President of Culturespaces Bruno Monnier stated to the French news channel CNews that 70 percent of people do not have a relationship with art (Santos, 2020, p. 11). He further stated that digitalisation of art is a solution to what he saw as a problem. Santos describes Monnier's statement as followed:

*“A new generation accustomed to virtualised images will be more responsive to such spaces [digital art spaces]. Monnier however, does not diminish the importance of institutional museums as guardians of humanity's patrimony.”* (Santos, 2020, p. 12)

A digitally oriented generation will most likely respond more to virtualised images and digitalised artworks, because society is likewise digitalised. The new generations are born and raised with technology which makes them understand what is exhibited because of its familiarity. This is why the digitalisation of art is a valid attempt to address a wider, but also

younger, audience. Furthermore, Monnier suggests that digital art centres like l'Atelier des Lumières “must be seen as an initiation to art” (ibid.). Because performative and technology-based museums are able to address a wider and perhaps also more modern audience, then it functions as a steppingstone to visit institutional museums and to see the original objects of art. This way a broader society can be introduced to and gain a meaningful relationship with art.

### **Political economy and consumerism**

Over the past decades there have been a decrease in the number of yearly museum visitors (Santos, 2020, p. 4). This is also one of the reasons as to why the museum practice has developed as argued. The museum narrative has undergone radical changes since the 70's and political and economic pressures have also had a big part in it. As earlier described the museum institution, especially having a legislative approach, tended to appeal mostly to the elitist part of society. But with interpreting and especially performative museums a bigger accessibility has appeared. Max Ross, author of the academic paper “*Interpreting the new museology*”, defines it as a whole new museology (Ross, 2004, p. 84). He further argues

*“Museums, it seems, have become altogether more accessible – the old atmosphere of exclusiveness and intellectual asceticism has largely given way to a more democratic climate”* (Ross, 2004, p. 85)

But what lies behind this development? Ross argues that political economy and the notion of producing consumers. A museums economy generally relies on several factors and sectors being private and public sources of funding and multiple pressures and effects of the growing consumer markets. Besides there are also political pressures being government legislation and marketing initiatives. These factors force the museum narrative to transform itself into being visitor-centred and consumer-oriented. A museum director whom Ross interviewed for his work stated the following regarding the matter.

*“I am very well aware that we have necessarily to be much more alert to our public coming through the door. Because ultimately it's a question of income.”* (Ross, 2004, p. 86).

A visitor's basic needs are, also due to a digitalised society and technological generations, oriented towards entertainment. Also, we live in a consumer-society, which means that museum practice has to conform to market-oriented initiatives in order to sustain an income. There is also demand from the state in the form of government legislation, that

complicate the management of a museum; they send strong messages about customer care, customer guarantees and customer service (Ross, 2004, p. 88). Ross describes it as followed

*“The demand by the state for museums to be able to measure the service they provide, and to raise both income and visitor numbers is seen as imposing limitations that force museum workers to change their practice”* (Ross, 2004, p. 89)

The issue leads to the question of whether the performative kind of museum becomes populist. The need to create consumers and improve public relations etc. are according to Ross’ theory resulting in the museum focusing more on *exciting* the visitor rather than *educating* them – which an immersive museum experience that is that is provided by a technological and performative museum. On the other hand, there is the argument of the president of l’Atelier des Lumières, who says that these museums are a steppingstone towards further education on art. I cannot define whether this functions in practice in this paper, but it is certainly an interesting approach to investigate. Populism is a difficult term to define in itself, and maybe it does not necessarily have to be a negatively connoted word. If one wants to introduce art to a broader part of society, then populism may be an effective approach. The issue arises when societal matters such as governmental legislation and capitalistic pressure forces museums narratives to be compromised. On the other hand the resistant attitude towards performative museums can also merely be an in-built resistance towards change in society and change in museum practice. Changes in society are happening, which means changes in museum practice necessarily must change too. I will not be the judge of whether this societal impact is good or bad – whether it is bad capitalism or inclusive democracy.

There are obviously both negative and positive outcomes from the introduction of technology in the museum narrative. As described in the analysis, the performative (immersive) museum diminishes the distance between spectator and object and establishes an interconnected relationship regardless of the cultural capital or knowledge of the spectator. The sacrifice, though, is the authority of the artwork, and some would argue the freedom of curators is also compromised due to societal change and pressure.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the museum narrative has moved away from being legislative and authoritative to being experience-based and to some degree consumer-oriented. With the use of technology performative museums are capable of establishing an immersive connection between spectator and artworks. L'Atelier des Lumières is an example of how cinematic and multimedia tools such as hundreds of projectors, music and animation invites the spectator to engage with the art in a new way, creating a physical dialogue. A connection that the legislative and partly also the interpreting museum cannot provide at the same efficiency.

The performative museum practice leads to further accessibility and higher attraction of visitors. This happens because the today's generation is growing up with technology and is to a much higher degree looking for entertainment and experiences. The performative museum is argued to be able to provide incitement to awaken the interest for original artworks, but it is still questionable whether the development is only a result of changes in society such as high consumerism and pressure in political economy.

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