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Book Review: The Critical Visitor: Changing Heritage Practices edited by E. Steinbock and H. Dibbits (2023)

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In 2016, following members' calls for a redefinition of the museum, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) acknowledged the importance of inclusivity, community engagement, and sustainability for the first time.¹ However, it would be several years before the terms *inclusivity*, *accessibility*, and *ethics* were formally integrated into its definition of museums. Reaching a consensus on interpreting these concepts and their impact on daily museum practices is challenging, exhausting, and often hardly possible due to the complexities of reconciling divergent viewpoints.² This has become increasingly intricate as not only are museums themselves compelled to adapt and evolve but also visitors who are increasingly vocal and actively express their observations, concerns, and critiques regarding the presentation of cultural heritage, institutional organisation, and their own involvement. The ongoing discussions regarding museums' central position in decolonisation, restitution and repatriation of looted art, social justice, and broader societal movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo highlight that objects can affect us profoundly and emotionally, for they form vital parts of personal identity and cultural memories.³ The complexities that arise when traditionally hierarchical and rigid institutions try to be more inclusive and grapple with their colonial legacies is what editors Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits want to bring to the surface in *The Critical Visitor: Changing Heritage Practices* (2023).⁴

This publication is the result of *The Heritage Sector at a Crossroads: The Way of Intersectionality Project*, which is part of the national Smart Culture programme

funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).⁵ The book corresponds with contemporary academic conversations on revising traditional heritage practices and explores how museums and those working in the heritage field can reflect and shape collective memories and identities through more dynamic and inclusive approaches.⁶ In the lineage of a growing corpus of studies that explore intersectionality as a practical strategy for cultural institutes to become catalysts and active places for discussion, *The Critical Visitor* combines critical theory with case studies and practical examples to offer a comprehensive approach to reimagining the roles of museums and archives in today's diverse and ever-changing society.⁷

The third volume of the *Work in Progress* series

Steinbock and Dibbitts' book is part of the *Work in Progress* series (2018–ongoing), published by the Wereldmuseum, Netherlands, a project dedicated to fostering a more introspective approach to museum practices. The series title implies that the documents are not meant to be definitive sets of rules to be followed due to the continuously evolving nature of the topics they address. Instead, the authors and editors would emphasize the process rather than reach a final goal and aim to invite others to contribute to further developments. Like its predecessors, this third volume in the series is an “incomplete guide”, freely available in Dutch and in English. It is intended to catalyse critical self-reflection based on collective insights and reflections from professionals working in Dutch cultural institutions, exploring contemporary museological and archival practices. The previous volumes discussed the material aspects and the political and social meanings of words used in museums in *Words Matter* (2017). Also, they addressed collection assessment, stakeholder interests, ethics, and finding new destinations for deaccessioning parts of collections in *Recollecting and Reallocation* (2020).⁸ In contrast, *The Critical Visitor* focuses on individuals who observe, work with, and engage with cultural heritage.

The double meaning of *The Critical Visitor*

The book's title, *The Critical Visitor*, is double in meaning, for it is both the inspiration for this book and its ultimate goal. It is about museum visitors who, in the past, have been marginalised in cultural contexts but have taken an active stance and discussed what is and has been presented in the art field. Responding to

structural inequality and power structures inherent in cultural organisations, the editors propose intersectionality to identify injustices and underrepresentation in cultural heritage practices, academia, and those working with museums and cultural heritage.⁹ This approach, according to the editors, “[...] insists on bringing into one frame the multiplicity and the interactivity of identity as it shifts from one context to the next, and even when aspects of identity shift in their registration as privileged, unmarked, or oppressed in and across these different arenas.”¹⁰ By offering a wide range of case studies and practical examples, the book should be a source of inspiration for the people working with or within the cultural heritage field to become self-reflexive and, ultimately, critical visitors themselves. Through this active engagement, the editors believe the hierarchies embedded within art institutions can be changed from within.

Structure and content

The book opens with a foreword by Wayne Modest that shows the exhaustive process of defining complex concepts such as accessibility, inclusivity, and confronting colonial legacies and systemic injustices in museums.¹¹ Steinbock and Dibbitts’ elaborate introduction discusses the multifaceted idea of intersectionality and the importance of applying this practice-oriented approach to foster a more socially engaged and sustainable heritage work. Similarly to previous volumes in the *Work in Progress* series, this book does not have a clearly defined structure, yet four main themes and questions guide the reader through the texts:

1. How does the capitalist mindset affect heritage work, including values and ethics?
2. What discrepancies exist in treating objects and visitors, and how do these reflect broader ethical considerations?
3. What is the role of emotions and affect in knowledge, and how can museums incorporate multisensory and embodied learning into their practices?
4. How can professionals, museums, and visitors become comfortable with surprise and discomfort to become more interactive, engaging, and resilient to socio-cultural changes?

The subsequent roundtable reflects on the Critical Visitor project and discusses the outcomes of the workshops and sessions that stimulated intersectional practices during the five-year program. The selection of articles, interviews, case

studies, and contributions from artists and cultural heritage professionals in the Netherlands cover a wide range of topics, for instance, the impact of decolonized thinking on the management of museum collections, the role of craft in LGBTI heritage, the challenges of polyphonic curation, and the emotional dynamics of heritage work.¹²

Although this review's length may not fully capture the richness of this volume, I will highlight a few contributions that I consider the most noteworthy. Inez Blanca van der Scheer et al.'s reflections on the Amsterdam Museum's efforts to address its colonial past show the importance of a multivocal approach to curation and the difficulties that arise when including diverse perspectives and histories.¹³ I want to draw attention to Hester Dibbits' contribution, which discusses "Emotion Networking" as a way of approaching heritage and the interaction with the visitor by considering the intangible elements that make objects matter to visitors, such as emotions, feelings, and memories.¹⁴ Having had the opportunity to participate in one of the Reinwardt Academy's *Emotion Networking Workshops* Dibbits organizes frequently, I can confirm that this method provided me with practical insights into the challenges and successes of promoting equity within heritage institutions.¹⁵ Subsequent texts follow this approach to heritage well, particularly in conjunction with Nynke Feenstra's "Learning through Art: Joseph Grigely and Art as a Perspective for an Accessible Representative Museum," which discusses the way museums can apply this way of embodied experiencing heritage to foster a more dynamic, equal, and inclusive way of interacting with their visitors.¹⁶

Critical analysis

One of the most outstanding aspects of *The Critical Visitor* is the richness of perspectives on the complexities of inclusivity and accessibility in museum practices. Although the book exclusively focuses on the Netherlands and discusses local cases, this does not limit the applicability in different countries and cultural contexts since each chapter brings a unique perspective to these overarching themes. The combination of critical and profound theoretical analyses with practical insights, which does not happen frequently enough in my opinion, makes it a valuable resource for cultural heritage professionals and a welcome addition to the current academic museum discourse. Also, including a page with each contribution detailing the primary method and relevant keywords and the book's availability in Dutch and English is particularly valuable. These features

enhance the practical application and critical vocabulary intended by the book's editors.

Despite these strengths, there are some points that felt less effective. I found the exhaustion expressed in the foreword, as well as the elaborate and detailed introduction and project description, to be discouraging as a reader for its ambitious scope leads to a lack of cohesion. Additionally, the abundance of complex concepts introduced in these sections made me feel hopeless that redressing the museum would be practically possible. The editors' efforts in addressing the diversity of meanings and perspectives with which these discourses, themes, and concepts can be approached are admirable. Yet, they assume a level of prior knowledge. Furthermore, the book's broad scope and the absence of a clearly defined structure can result in a lack of cohesiveness, and transitions between parts and topics are not always seamless.

Consequently, this book may not be accessible to all readers, particularly those new to the field of critical museum studies, and may limit its practical applicability. As a result, I question if the book's impact on heritage practices and the change that the editors aim to achieve with this volume may be as groundbreaking as the editors might have anticipated. The addition of a glossary with simplified definitions of the concepts and an appendix with a concise version of the introduction and the key findings of *The Critical Visitor* project might have solved this issue.

Conclusion

In summary, *The Critical Visitor* is an insightful, thought-provoking, and essential read for heritage professionals and scholars. It is a thought-provoking anthology that explores the evolving landscape of museums and heritage institutions through decolonization, inclusivity, and critical engagement. The authors' diverse backgrounds and approaches provided a dynamic, diverse, and encouraging overview of the challenges that arise when centuries of museum theory and practices are reconsidered. Despite delving into complex and dense topics, it is impressive that the editors managed to create an academically profound book that remains readable and applicable in practice, thanks to the numerous practical examples. In conclusion, *The Critical Visitor* is a valuable resource for anyone dedicated to promoting active conversations and critical discussions among their visitors, staff, and collections in order to become places of critical reflection where everyone's voices, emotions, and perspectives are respected.

Notes

- 1 Markus Walz, "It Is, It Was, They Are, We Are: The Museum Definition as a Norm and a Collective Framework," *ICOFOM Study Series* 48-2 (December 15, 2020): 235-246, <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.2875>.
- 2 During the period the museum definition was revisited, the differences in ideologies and perceptions of terms such as accessibility and inclusion came to the surface. The way these topics are interpreted is evidently not set in stone and might be different per country, cultural background, gender, demography and so on. Furthermore, museums are extraordinarily varied and their visitors are hardly comparable, meaning each museum or cultural heritage institution also has their own frame of reference, expectations, and concerns. To read more about this, see: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/08/19/what-exactly-is-a-museum-icom-comes-to-blows-over-new-definition>; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/08/13/icom-in-turmoil-after-row-over-new-definition-of-museums>.
 ICOM, "Museum Definition," August 24, 2022, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>; "Final Report from the Standing Committee for Museum Definition" (Prague: ICOM, August 24, 2022), https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EN_EGA2022_MuseumDefinition_WDoc_Final-2.pdf; V. Golding and W. Modest, eds., *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, 1st ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
- 3 Jack van der Leden, "Emoties Vormen Een Brug Tussen Kunst En Kijker," *Boekmanstichting*, Winter /2022 2021, https://www.boekman.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BmXtra_38_def.pdf; Jack van der Leden et al., "Samen Verschillend," *Boekmanstichting*, Zomer 2020, https://www.boekman.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BmXtra_38_def.pdf; Jack van der Leden, "Teruggave Koloniale Cultuurgooier: Niet Het Einde van Een Proces, Maar Een Nieuw Begin," *Boekmanstichting*, January 2023, https://www.boekman.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BmXtra_38_def.pdf.
- 4 Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits, eds., *The Critical Visitor: Changing Heritage Practices*, Work in Progress 3 (Amsterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2023), <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/critical-visitor-changing-heritage-practices>.
- 5 To learn more about the Smart Culture program and its publications, see: <https://www.nwo.nl/en/researchprogrammes/creative-industry/smart-culture>.
- 6 Golding, Viv, and Wayne Modest. *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Part III – Audiences and Diversity.
 Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (Routledge, 2013): 79-106; Shaindlin, Valerie Brett. "Reading Museum Exhibits." *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* 3, no. 2 (2019): 63-79. The book is avail-

- able in Dutch and English (free of charge): <https://amsterdam.wereldmuseum.nl/en/about-wereldmuseum-amsterdam/research/the-critical-visitor>
- 7 Amy Lonetree, "Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments," *The Public Historian* 43, no. 4 (2021): 21–27; Charlotte Cross and John D. Giblin, *Critical Approaches to Heritage for Development* (Taylor & Francis, 2022); Mike Murawski, *Museums as Agents of Change: A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); L. E. Coleman, *Understanding and Implementing Inclusion in Museums* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018); Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2010).
 - 8 *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, Work in Progress 1 (Leiden-Rotterdam-Amsterdam-Berg & Dal: Wereldmuseum, 2017), <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/publications/words-matter>; Wayne Modest, Robin Lelijveld, and Ninja Rijns-Kleikamp, eds., *Recollecting and Reallocation: Collection Assessment, Ethical Deaccessioning and Multiple Stakeholders*, Work in Progress 2 (Leiden: National Museum of World Cultures, 2020), <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/research/publications/recollecting-and-reallocation-herzamelen-en-herbestemmen>.
 - 9 Steinbock and Dibbits, 14–27.
 - 10 Steinbock and Dibbits, 26.
 - 11 Wayne Modest, "Foreword, or On Exhaustion," in *The Critical Visitor: Intersectional Approaches for Rethinking and Retooling Accessibility and Inclusivity in Heritage Spaces*, ed. Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits, Work in Progress 3 (Amsterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2023), 5–10.
 - 12 To learn more about the project, see: <https://arias.amsterdam/the-critical-visitor-intersectional-approaches-for-rethinking-retooling-accessibility-and-inclusivity-in-heritage-spaces/>
 - 13 Inez Blanca van der Scheer et al., "Polyphonic Curation – Looking Back and Ahead to the Colonial Past at the Amsterdam Museum," in *The Critical Visitor: Intersectional Approaches for Rethinking and Retooling Accessibility and Inclusivity in Heritage Spaces*, ed. Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits, Work in Progress 3 (Amsterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2023), 125–157.
 - 14 Hester Dibbits, "Emotion Networking: A Heritage Practice," in *The Critical Visitor: Intersectional Approaches for Rethinking and Retooling Accessibility and Inclusivity in Heritage Spaces*, ed. Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits, Work in Progress 3 (Amsterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2023), 211–229.
 - 15 "Emotion Networking: Heritage and Citizenship in the Twenty-First Century" (Inaugural lecture, Rotterdam, 2016), <https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/leoraat-cultureel-erfgoed/publicaties/publicatie/delen-van-het-verleden-erfgoed-en-educatie-in-de-21ste-eeuw/>. If you are interested in joining an Emotion Networking Workshop, see: <https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/leoraat-cultureel-erfgoed/emotienetwerken/>

- 16 N. H. Feenstra, "Learning through Art: Joseph Grigely and Art as a Perspective for an Accessible, Representative Museum," in *The Critical Visitor: Intersectional Approaches for Rethinking and Retooling Accessibility and Inclusivity in Heritage Spaces*, Work in Progress 3 (Amsterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2023), 279–297.

About the contributor

Liselore Tissen is a postdoctoral researcher at Leiden University and Delft University of Technology and coordinator of communication, education, research, and ethics at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and Social Sciences and Humanities Open Cloud (SHHOC-NL). Her research focuses on the intersection of the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, the arts, and technology. By integrating philosophical and ethical evaluations with field research and museum visitor studies, she explores the moral and practical implications of emerging technologies for the art field, contemporary artists, technical art historical research, conservation, and museum presentation.