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# Accessible curatorship: exhibition development based on relationships with different audiences

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**Keywords** curatorship; accessibility; participation; museology; Brazil

**Abstract** This article explains the results of the post-doctoral research “Accessible curatorship: exhibition and cultural action proposals centered on the relationship of different audiences with cultural heritage.” The investigation has theoretical and practical results collected through observation, and analyzes specific cases of accessible and participatory curatorship practices in museums and other cultural institutions. The research focused on curatorial practice where the target audience, through representatives, focus groups and collectives, participated in creating exhibition ideas, conducting exhibition research, and producing exhibitions, museums projects, and educational programs. The methodology combines a literature analysis in the areas of Museology Theory, Communication and Criticism, Curatorship, and Cultural Action, and empirical data collection via technical visits and interviews with people who participated as co-curators in Brazilian and international cultural institutions. The main objective of the research was to find answers to create a methodology to help institutions and professionals to produce accessible exhibitions with participatory curatorship, where the target audiences, representatives of specific audiences or actors of the heritage, can contribute their knowledge and experience to exhibition development.

**About the Authors** Viviane Panelli Sarraf is a postdoctoral researcher in Museology at the Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil. She received her PhD in the field of Communication and Semiotics. Currently Sarraf serves as Lecturer, Curator, and Consultant with 16 years of experience in the field of museum accessibility, specializing in cultural accessibility in exhibitions. She is the founder of *Museus Acessíveis*, which consults on museum accessibility, and won the ICOM Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) Best Practices Award in 2012.

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## Introduction

*Museums are the children of the society that begets them and, like all children, serve to help the ‘parents’ in their process of updating and recycling the world. Museums are micro-systems within the social system; they interact with each other. They can and should be the major*

*agents in the processes connected with Humanization and respect for Life.<sup>1</sup>*

This text presents results from the postdoctoral research entitled “Accessible curatorship: exhibition and cultural action proposals centered on the relationship of different audiences with cultural heritage” carried out in the Postgraduate Program in Museology at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, between 2013 and 2016. It focuses on theoretical and practical investigation into participatory and accessible curatorship practices in cultural institutions and museums, observing and analyzing specific cases.

We consider “accessible curatorship” as that which develops exhibition and cultural action projects centered on the relationship between different publics and cultural heritage, with the aim of fostering bonds and a sense of belonging with the museum. This kind of curatorship can be developed with or without the input of people who represent the audiences, but we also consider that the participation of these actors guarantee better results and extended benefits to the museum environment.

The idea to develop an accessible curatorship methodology by encouraging representatives of the public to participate in museums and cultural spaces arose from the need to connect with various audiences. The concept aimed to attract and encourage the public to create meaning for cultural heritage, thereby enhancing cultural and human development in their communities. By fostering public involvement in their procedures, museums affirm that their audiences are knowledgeable and capable of learning skills to help preserve and communicate cultural heritage. Brazilian museums are beginning to take on a new attitude on this front, sharing their decision-making power about what constitutes heritage and how it should be presented by taking into consideration the knowledge of individual members of society.

*The professionals usually connected with a public institution (university, museum, archives, management administration) are useful above all, in a secondary phase, for their expertise and because of their institutional legitimacy. However, their view of heritage is partial, closely tied to their scientific discipline or to their duties. They are rarely accustomed to working with others, as holders of a subjective view of heritage.<sup>2</sup>*

According with this author, the participation of different persons (visitors, community members, representatives of specific audiences) must be included in recognizing cultural heritage, because it belongs to them. Museum professionals have numerous skills to help support and to preserve this heritage, but the construction of concepts about cultural heritage should be participatory, because museums exists to preserve heritage for the development of the society.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the conception of cultural heritage is a civil right: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to know the scientific advancement and its benefits.”<sup>3</sup> This means that all individuals, regardless of origin, social class, experience, disability, or any other

socioeconomic factor that may classify them as minorities or belonging to socially excluded populations, have the right to enjoy and participate in the creation of cultural heritage.

### **Materials and methods**

This research occurred between 2013 and 2016. Postdoctoral research in Brazil takes the form of an internship program for individuals who have completed their Ph.D. and wish to work as titular professors in postgraduate university programs. Candidates must undertake an investigation that contributes to research conducted by the department, which also involves teaching activities and practical benefits within the specific field of the research – in our case, for museums.

During the investigation period, we offered courses open to community members, and classes about Accessibility in Museums in the Postgraduate Program of Museology at the University of São Paulo. We also helped to develop accessible and participatory curatorship methods in new exhibitions and educational programs in order to benefit the university's museums.

We analyzed thirty cases of accessible and participatory curatorship in Brazil and elsewhere, through literature, by visiting exhibitions and museums, and by conducting interviews with curators and participants. Fifteen of these cases were projects developed in Brazilian museums and cultural institutions housing diverse collections in varied places, ranging from major cities to secondary cities, islands, and the Amazon rainforest. We also analyzed fifteen cases of museums and cultural organizations in other countries that are carrying out projects that facilitate the participation of different audiences.

To demonstrate some successful practices of accessible and participatory curatorship, we have selected four cases, which we could analyze using two or more kinds of data, including articles, museum visits, and interviews with curators and project participants.

### **Results**

#### **Cultural accessibility, accessibility in museums, and accessible curatorship**

In this research, I consider the diverse audiences that help to curate exhibitions, cultural, and educational activities to include people with disabilities, children, young adults, native people, immigrants, and underserved communities. By taking these audiences into consideration, it is necessary to reinforce some concepts of accessibility in museums. Cultural accessibility is a new concept in Brazil, and is defined as the adaptations, measures, and actions taken that aim to be welcoming, and to provide welfare and access to cultural activities for people with disabilities and other audiences.

Accessibility in museums can be understood as the right to reach, perceive, use, and participate in everything that is offered for general visitors with respect, dignity, without physical barriers, and without barriers of communication, information, and attitude. It means that museums need to create accessible exhibitions and adapt common spaces as gardens, restaurants, classrooms and auditoriums. It is important to make the information services including libraries and archives free of communication barriers, and to offer inclusive education programs and courses, guaranteeing that all offers must be accessible for all individuals, perceptible for different forms of communication, allowing independence for all kinds of visitors.

The audiences benefitting from this concept are people with visual, physical, intellectual, and multiple disabilities, including deaf and deaf blind people, elderly people, young children, first-time visitors, tourists, immigrants, and people who prefer alternative ways to experience the cultural heritage.

These visitors come to the museum in diverse groups and audiences: as children and young people in regular or special schools/organizations, as families, tourists, employees of the institution, expert visitors, artists, historians, philosophers, undergraduate students, researchers, and leaders who also act as opinion makers.

Considering these facets, we can affirm that museums need to commit to the democratization of culture, considering accessibility as a transversal challenge, not a responsibility exclusive for educational programs. To transform this concept in reality, it is necessary to create opportunities of Accessible Curatorship that consider Physical Access, Accessible Communication, Accessible Content, Accessible Experience, Accessible Attitude, and Opportunities for Participation.

The concept of Accessible and Participatory Curatorship is not exclusively addressed to ensure the participation of people with disabilities and other audiences in the exhibition curatorial decision-making process. For my work, this new curatorship concept is the one that develops projects centered on the relationship between different publics and cultural heritage, with the aim to create bonds and to foster a feeling of belonging with the museum.

Participation in curatorial practices has the added benefit of establishing and building loyalty among new audiences, thereby fulfilling the social function of museums and the appropriation of the museum environment for socializing, leisure activities, and cultural growth.

## **Discussion**

### **Accessible curatorship projects**

A selection of good practice for achieving accessible and participatory curatorship will be presented and analyzed to show its effectiveness in museums. The cases presented have some common elements. Each is as participatory curatorship project with specific audience groups that conceives of an exhibition and/or educational program that considers diversity and inclusion of new audiences. Also discussed are opportunities for volunteers and staff to promote change in traditional museum communication and discourse.

### **The Dorina Nowill Memorial, Dorina Nowill Brazilian Foundation for the Blind, São Paulo, Brazil (Centro de Memoria Dorina Nowill, Fundação Dorina Nowill para Cegos)**

The Fundação Dorina Nowill para Cegos is a pioneering Brazilian institution addressing social inclusion for the visually impaired. From 1999 to 2013, we established and curated the Centro de Memoria Dorina Nowill, a museum developing the social inclusion movement for the visually impaired in Brazil. Dorina Nowill (1919-2010), a social inclusion specialist, was actively involved in the process. Using accessible and participatory curatorship, the museum carries out cultural action projects and programs to encourage the inclusion of visitors with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, the exhibition *E tudo começou assim: idéias, histórias e projetos que mudaram a vida das pessoas com deficiência* (*And so it all began: actions, projects and stories that changed the lives of people with visual disabilities*), was developed in cooperation with a team of curators. The research and development of the core themes arose from a heritage education program involving all members of the institution's staff, 120 people of different ages and backgrounds, including a large number with visual disabilities, and some with other physical disabilities.

To begin the exhibition's curatorship and design, each employee was involved in planning the new Heritage Educational Program, which aimed to teach educators and collaborators to improve communication strategies used for the exhibition. Importance was placed on highlighting the particular talents of each employee in constructing this culture of accessibility.

The program's educational activities began a year before the exhibition opening with a course for the Institution's employees. During this phase, meetings were held involving staff and volunteers (with and without disabilities) in order to ensure that everyone felt educated in the history of the inclusion of people with visual disabilities in Brazil. These meetings encouraged participants to contribute their own memories to the collection of oral memory, and to help develop the new exhibition.



Exhibition entitled "And so it all began: actions, projects and stories that changed the lives of people with visual disabilities" with visitors, 2013.

The course addressed a number of themes: the definition of the terms *museum* and memorial, the recognition of participants' own histories; and the development and preservation of collections and communication procedures through exhibitions and educational activities. The activities also included a visit to a museum chosen by the participants, and the collective organization of a preliminary exhibition using their ideas, oral memories. This included the opportunity to provide feedback, and the possibility to contribute to developing elements for the final exhibition and educational programs.

This course made it possible to identify individuals interested in participating in curating the exhibition and conceiving of the educational program. As a result of this process, two groups were created to collaborate directly with curating the new exhibition and educational activities:

one for developing participatory curatorship, coordinated by curator Viviane Sarraf, and another for training educators for exhibition visits, coordinated by educator Juliane Rega.

The entire exhibition was developed with the collaboration of professionals from different areas of expertise within the institution, from the recording studio to rehabilitation and social services. The proposals for educational visits and activities were drawn up and carried out by employees from different areas in the organization (with specializations as diverse as editing Braille books, human resources, production of accessible digital books, and event-planning), coordinated by the Centro de Memória's educators.

The exhibition's participatory curatorship project, inspired by the Heritage Educational Program, achieved better results than expected. Those involved in the collective construction of the exhibition and educational activities developed new ideas and ways of talking about their experiences as individuals with visual disabilities or as professionals who work directly with such audiences.

The exhibitions featured environments simulating different situations in the daily lives of people with visual disabilities, such as: school classrooms with equipment available for inclusive educational activities from the past and present; workstations with technologies for faster communication and connectivity; a darkened living room to experience watching television without the ability to see; and a woman's closet with makeup and accessories marked with braille labels.

Educators developed special visits with activities to help visitors experience and think about the conditions of individuals with disabilities. These included audio-guided visits in the dark; visits with a coffee break in the dark to teach visitors about the importance of visual guides and descriptions in blind people's daily activities; and visits with braille writing workshops, focusing on the importance of this invention in the education of blind students.

This experience reinforced more than heritage recognition and feelings of belonging for the Dorina Foundation's employees. It provided an innovative and lively cultural experience based on different voices to the memorial's environment and based on its visitors.

### **Football Museum, residence for people with disabilities, São Paulo, Brazil (Museu do Futebol, "Deficiente Residente" program)**

The Museu do Futebol is a history museum that preserves collections and communicates memory indicators about soccer in Brazil. Its mission is to investigate and introduce the multiple aspects of soccer, such as the importance on Brazil's cultural expression in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The museum develops several educational programs, cultural actions, and events applicable to a wide range of audiences including school groups, young and adult individual visitors, people with disabilities, elderly people, and families.<sup>5</sup>

In 2010, the museum's education coordinators, Laerte Machado and Ialê Costa, created a residence program for people with disabilities, "Deficiente Residente." They hoped to develop relationships with audiences with disabilities and to increase the accessible resources offered by the museum's PAMF (Football Museum Accessibility Program).



Tactile game used in family programs, created with help from the Museu do Futebol residents program, 2012.

Until 2015, the museum created five editions of the project, inviting different types of audiences to each one: blind and people with low vision, deaf people, people with intellectual disabilities, people with physical disabilities, and people with mental issues. Two residents selected for each edition spent six months working with the education and visitor staff, and helped to create accessible resources and games to be used in educational programs for different activities.

The program's results exceeded the initial goals. For example, the residents with visual disabilities inspired the museum's former curator, Leonel Kaz, to curate an exhibition about different ways to perceive a soccer game. This temporary exhibition, entitled *Olhar com outro olhar* (See with other sight), presented a Paralympic soccer game for blind players using sensory resources and experiences to be perceived using blindfold masks.

### **MAM - Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, *140 Characters* exhibition**

The MAM - Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo's 2014 exhibition *140 Characters*, also adopted the participatory curatorship method.

The idea to create an exhibition with public participation originated with the museum's directors. Curator Felipe Chaimovich created a one-year "Curatorship Laboratory" to provide students enrolled in the museum's courses the experience of participating in the museum's processes. The course was designed to expose students to readings, debates, and analyses that would culminate in a curatorial and production project to develop an exhibition consisting primarily of contemporary Brazilian art works from the museum's collection.

There were no student enrollment criteria, but it was "first come, first served" for those who wanted to participate. The course only required tertiary-level training and an interest in curating. As with many other courses offered by the museum, this course was open to every visitor interested in getting involved with contemporary art. The twenty available spots were filled on the first day to sign up.



“140 Characters” exhibition at MAM, 2014.

Working individually and in groups, the students wrote and re-wrote texts until they discovered a common desire to mount an exhibition that would provoke reflection on political mobilization through social networks. According to Chaimovich, the Curatorship Laboratory coordinator and organizer of the participatory proposal, the main idea proposed by the curatorial group focused on a particular social development in Brazil:

*What happened in June 2013? The public demonstrations that shook Brazil last year remain unexplained. The political force of the tens of thousands of citizens occupying public spaces with multiple complaints evaded traditional forms of collective representation. Day after day, the actions were reported in new cities, and whether large, medium, or small, they were always unpredictable. But what all the actions had in common was a new form of mobilization: social networks. This virtual communication tool is decentralized, and evades control, using anonymity and redirection as information multipliers. Thus, the demonstrations that began in June also approximated Brazil to similar political phenomena in other parts of the world, such as the Arab Spring. Political mobilization through virtual media is, in fact, shaking up the powers that be.<sup>6</sup>*

In their project, the curators concluded that political mobilization through virtual communication is shaking up traditional forms of constituted power. The language employed during the movement was new, aiming to mobilize people through social networks by using short phrases, sharing protest locations, and using extremely synthetic themes or “hash tags” that interlinked topics. Slogans were adapted for social network formats in order to take advantage of existing virtual communication platforms. The most succinct social network is Twitter, accepting a maximum of 140 characters per message, and so the language scale on Twitter became the leitmotif for the exhibition.

To carry out the exhibition planning, students split into groups to explore tasks such as: selecting works, holding meetings with professionals in the areas of conservation, documentation, education, communication and exhibition design, writing text, mounting and identifying the works, and holding events during the exhibition. Some 140 works related to the theme of political mobilization were selected from the MAM collection, and the

accompanying texts and comments were provided by the Curatorship Laboratory students. According to Chaimovich:

*Within a collective, individual authorship is diluted for the benefit of joint actions. This premise has recently gained strength on social networks, where online groups share thoughts and opinions, as well as in demonstrations on the streets, where individuals lose their identities in the crowd in order to strengthen the cause.<sup>7</sup>*

### **Museum of World Cultures, Gothenburg, Sweden**

The Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg was originally the National Museum of Ethnology of Sweden, founded in 19<sup>th</sup> century. The former institution was broken into four new museums in Stockholm and in Gothenburg with the aim to create spaces and programs connected with the contemporary social questions. In Gothenburg's Museum of World Cultures (MWC), museum staff started developing participative and accessible curatorship projects to attract new audiences, schools, and families with young children in 2009-10.

The museum's first exhibition with accessible and participatory curatorship was *Earthlings*, created with a participatory approach with 30 five and six-year old children from different regions of the city, selected with support of Gothenburg's department of education. The curatorial process took almost one year with weekly meetings with the group of children and MWC staff from different museum departments.



Girl selecting an object from the Museum of World Cultures collection, 2009.

The team responsible for the project was formed by exhibition developer Lina Malm and educator Eva Tua Ekstrom, with collaboration from other museum professionals. With active participation from the children, Malm and Ekstrom created new ideas, approaches, and resources to not only attract audiences of young children, but also benefit other publics including people with sensory and intellectual disabilities.

All elements of the project were built in collaboration with the children: the theme *Earthlings* about an E.T. that come to earth to meet humans; the image design of the exhibition's main thematic character; the design of sensory resources; the selection of objects from the

museum collection; the texts and videos explaining the objects' meanings; and the promotion of the exhibition in newspapers and television programs.

The exhibition opened in 2010, and until it closed in 2015 was visited extensively by school groups consisting of 5 to 10 year olds, and by families with young children. The exhibition became a meeting point for families, providing kids a safe and inspiring place to play. Adults and young adults also visited the exhibition, attracted by the sensory and interactive resources.

The results of this first participatory curating experience was so positive for the museum that it created a large new exhibition utilizing the same participatory and accessible methods. The new exhibition, *Together*, was created in collaboration with a group of families who had children with and without disabilities. The exhibition opened in 2015 and occupies the main MWC gallery space.

## **Conclusion**

### **Benefits and learning**

In analyzing these practices, it is possible to affirm that all visitors benefited from the exhibitions and educational programs developed with participative and accessible curatorial process. The spaces and multisensory resources created in these projects are accessible for diverse audiences including adults, children, people with disabilities, families with babies, and young children, because the exhibitions access different abilities and intelligences. The welcoming spaces and experiences promote connections between groups and individual visitors.

Museums have the potential to be widely accessible and participative by using new ways to preserve and communicate cultural heritage by considering their audiences as partners and co-creators, respecting their diversity and differences. Involving these underrepresented publics in participatory and accessible curatorship projects helps museums understand their wants and needs, a goal which can only be accomplished by inviting new audiences to share their knowledge and experiences.

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## **Notes**

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