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## **Museums as intersectional spaces for activist solidarity**

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This chapter responds to the themes of *pedagogical sensibilities and anticolonial museum work* by exploring two separate, but intertwined art education projects (cases) carried out in collaboration between the Art Education Programme at Aalto University, the Finnish National Gallery's Ateneum Art Museum (later Ateneum), the Amos Rex art museum, and individuals associated with local NGOs. This collaboration is founded on the university's societal role of collaborating with partner institutions from various cultural sectors with whom there is a shared interest to develop critical, impactful and research-based art education and museum pedagogies.

Moreover, the collaboration with museums and the university has created varied modes of working and thinking together as allyships (Ng et al., 2017), on issues that are in urgent need of critical rethinking and which museums are unable to undertake alone. The cases presented here were seminars and a workshop series based upon the need for museum professionals to generate opportunities for further contemplation of complicated, complex, partially uncomfortable and uncertain, even unintentionally discriminatory and racist contents and practices. All these are embedded in the museum collections, exhibition practices, communications with audiences and pedagogical work. The cases were: 1) *Queering/Reconceiving the Museum* (2019), and 2) *The Egypt of Glory exhibition* (2021).

### **Case 1: *The Queering/Reconceiving the Museum***

This project and the consequent seminar, museum tours and workshops took place in 2019. The seminar was hosted by the Ateneum Art Museum, which is part of the Finnish National Gallery. The project's central aim was to support collective work to advance gender and sexual diversity and democratic cultures within the ethical, cultural and operational environment of the Finnish museum field. The project was implemented by faculty from Aalto University and professionals from the Ateneum museum in cooperation with the Culture for All Service and the Finnish Museums Association. As part of the seminar day, normative practices and attitudes, as well as new openings, were collectively and critically examined with museum professionals invited from all museum institutions in Finland. By identifying oppressive structures and sharing practices through which museum professionals are working actively against such structures, the aim was to draw attention to the power museums hold in creating and maintaining normative histories as well as striving to dismantle them.

*The Queering/Reconceiving the Museum* project was a nominee for the national Pedali Annual Award in Museum Pedagogy in 2020.

### **Case 2: *The Egypt of Glory***

This exhibition, which took place in the Amos Rex art museum (from October, 2020 to March, 2021) was the context for a workshop series, where the facilitators Melanie Orenius and Kataja Ekholm engaged art museum staff, including curatorial team, a conservator, an Egyptologist, public programme personnel, technical staff and communications team, in exploring the possibilities for new object relations (Ekholm & Orenius 2021).

*The Egypt of Glory* exhibition consisted of ancient Egyptian artefacts on loan from an Italian institution, Museo Egizio. Ekholm and Orenius engaged participants in discussions about anticolonialism within a museum, through working with the objects acquired for Europe through colonial means and raising questions about violent colonial histories and the persistent continued logics of coloniality in exhibition spaces. The workshops focused on the complex feelings and the possibility to initiate change by attending to those emotions as well as by assuming responsibility and taking accountability. A significant notion within this process was grief, as this was seen to be an essential element within a process of re-narrating a colonialist legacy as well as a thematic opening for exploring alternative relationships to the exhibited objects and their histories. Ekholm and Orenius (2021) studied these thematics further within their thesis, which was part of a larger *Shadow of Egypt* research and study project carried out in collaboration with Aalto University and Amos Rex (<https://www.aalto.fi/en/news/study-project-draws-out-the-background-of-amos-rex-popular-egypt-exhibition>). *The Shadow of Egypt* project won the national Pedaali Annual Award in Museum Pedagogy in 2021.

Both museums, Ateneum and Amos Rex, are located in the city center of Helsinki. Although the museums are almost neighbors, they are quite different in their collections, exhibition policies and audience profiles. Being the first public art museum in Finland and the first institution in Finland to employ a museum educator to mediate art, Ateneum has a long tradition and carries significant responsibilities nationally. Amos Rex is owned by a private association (<https://konstsamfundet.fi/>). It opened recently, in late 2018, and has youth and children as its special target audience groups.

Both cases focus on different, but intersecting aspects of equity and social justice (e.g. Nussbaum, 2012; Sen, 2012). They were built on antinormative, antioppressive, sensuous and sensible arts education pedagogies (Gershon, 2019; Kumashiro, 2002) and critical museum studies (Janes & Sandell, 2019; Byrne et al., 2018), which implies that the approach is the antithesis of the ideologies that have built and maintained colonialist and discriminatory practices and enabled further oppression. Rather, this approach is sensitive to the complexity of the histories/herstories/theirstories; sensitive to the ethical and emotional issues involved; and further, founded on the understanding that all people's intentions, aims and participation are grounded in a holistic sense of being. Both cases are centred on caring pedagogies that address the underlying injustice and inequities as well as aiming to actively trouble and dismantle these, however, attending to the participants and co-learners holistically by aiming to generate spaces for solidarity.

In this chapter, we challenge oppressive practices of museum institutions from an antinormative (queer) and anticolonial stance. *The Egypt of Glory* is only one, but a typical example of a blockbuster exhibition that served its visitors with an ideologically safe and mainstreamed content, while its troubling colonialist foundations were concealed. We claim that the ethically troubling, colonizing content needs to be systematically scrutinized to change the practices (Procter, 2020). Similar examples could be identified from the Ateneum museum, which participates in Pride Week events, but does not systematically question the national narratives Ateneum and the Finnish National Gallery help to maintain, besides their harmful and oppressive implications for many. People identifying with broader sexual, gender or cultural diversity, other than the dominant majority, find it difficult, if not even impossible, to identify with the normative practices and rhetoric of the museums. Museums have established feminist and queer tours and support events that focus on dialogues about diversity. However, collectively, we need to work more systematically and much harder on

our prevailing attitudes and practices until we reach more inclusive museum cultures and institutes that feel more welcoming to inherent diversity.

These cases and the consequent writing process challenge the prevailing binary divisions within museum knowledges and their inscribed hegemonic, hierarchical structures between people, objects and knowledges; for example, we note the separation between expert knowledge and so-called dilettante or amateur knowledges, or plain objects and objects of cultural heritage and value, even the divisions between museum staff and museum visitors. These challenges are not seen as external, but primarily targeted at the authors themselves and their participation in the renewal and maintenance of these structures. We, the authors, strive to generate possibilities and opportunities for museum professionals and educators to collectively uncover and unlearn the discriminatory structures, politics and practices of museums and art institutions, to find ways to dismantle them, and to formulate ways of articulating case-specific alternatives to them.

Universities have their societal role beside research and pedagogical tasks. This intersection is where we met as the authors. The MA thesis projects of both museum cases provide a platform for wider discussions on critical museum practices. Advisors and students came together for a learning collective. During the writing process of this text students became alumnae, and previous roles as advisors and students unraveled. Simultaneously, questions that were at first research questions in different MA theses became more shared and positioned as a wider societal challenge.

### **Working in collaboration to establish anticolonial and queerer museum practice**

The presented cases reflect the current anticolonial struggle to rethink museums and museum work from within. They ask what is worth preserving in museum practices and what should

be radically rethought. In our study, radical rethinking means a critical reading of all museum activities and knowledges through and with artistic, activist and antinormative pedagogies. From a theoretical perspective, anticolonial theory and queer pedagogy question what we perceived as socially normative or generally accepted, leading to a critical examination of social and institutional hegemonies and oppressive structures, and especially of our own privileges (Kumashiro, 2002; Choi et al., 2018.) We suggest that acknowledgment of oppression and criticality towards museums' exhibitions and audience work is not sufficient to dismantle oppressive practices, as museums were founded upon these very same oppressive structures (Kumashiro, 2002; Smith, 2020). To instigate a systematic change, queering approaches are vital. The authors understand the term queer in its broader sense, meaning both the diversity of gender and sexuality and as non-normative feminist and activist aspirations of constantly questioning, looking beyond and troubling what we already know (Kumashiro, 2002; Suominen & Pusa, 2018).

The orientation in our cases, and within this study, is rooted in anticolonial studies, queer feminism, politics of solidarity, posthuman new materialism and intersectional feminism (Cameron, 2018; Butler, 1990; Kumashiro, 2002; Laitinen & Pessi, 2010; Rossi, 2015; Rousell et al., 2020). With both cases, our theoretical frames guided the planning, facilitation and realization from within. During the consequent writing and sharing process, rather than performing a systemic comparison or evaluation of the two cases, we used our dialogic writing space and our conversations to identify resonances, disconnects and conflicts that were previously unrecognized or suppressed to avoid acknowledgment of the uncomfortable, disruptive and discomfiting. Through this, two perspectives emerged: 1) *Solidarity in speech: creating spaces for sharing*, and 2) *Please, ~~do not~~ touch: Solidarity in object relations*. These perspectives are discussed more closely in the concluding sections of this chapter.

## **Solidarity in speech: Creating spaces for sharing**

We understand that solidarity is a political strategy to recognize oppression and create spaces of resistance against structural oppression (Dai, 2016). When people with shared interests come together, new connections within thematic framings might emerge. According to Laitinen and Pessi (2010), solidarity both *appears* in acts and collaboration and *strengthens* through actions and collaborations. While conventional solidarity might take the shape of charity and volunteering or expressions of goodwill, for example, by donating money or time (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018), we propose an alternative understanding of solidarity, which could mean ‘artist’(Mouffe, 2013) solidarity.

Our projects aimed at creating spaces for professionals to reflect on their complex experiences, as well as offering support and openness to diverse perspectives without judgment or without relying on normative thinking. Being together and sharing experiences created room for a new understanding and a sense of togetherness to emerge. Acknowledging that complex and often contradictory emotions and reactions were present took a crucial role within these processes.

One of the main goals for the *Queering/Reconceiving the museum seminar* at Ateneum was to bring together professionals to share and to see if a sense of solidarity in the process of change could be created. The aim was to facilitate a seminar that would invite museum professionals and art educators to come up with a common vocabulary and understanding of queer pedagogy that could aid in creating more inclusive museum spaces and practices. In one of the workshops, participants were led to discuss their organizations’ weaknesses in relation to diversity as well as in relation to publics’ expectations. The group’s shared consensus was that the desirable changes were slow and bureaucratic, and the budgets

allocated to specific tasks could not meet the operational needs imposed by the ideologies. While they hoped for the museum to become more diverse and equal in practices and appeal, they acknowledged that the staff was predominantly homogenous, identifying as white and middle-aged. An organization's equity and equality strategy and implementation plan was seen as vital if the institutions were to become allies for diverse voices and perspectives.

Post seminar, we, the project facilitators and three of the authors of this chapter, were left to ponder whether museums can truly diversify their practices and mission, if museum environments can be restructured so as to not further trigger minority stress, especially in those visitors who identify as belonging to several marginalized groups. Further troubling contemplation led us to ponder what inclusiveness and inclusivity really mean and whether this is even an achievable aim, considering the institutions' strong oppressive histories and continued practices. However, the activist and artistic potentiality of queer pedagogy was not fully actualized, as the 'actions' occurred mainly in a speech and in articulations of queer orientations and pedagogies. Much was still lost, as the rich material and sensuous conditions and aspects of a museum work were not yet explored. Solidarity was manifested primarily in speech and initiated dialogues.

### **“Please ~~do not~~ touch”: Solidarity in object relations**

In new materialist readings, people connect to and understand their surroundings through touch (Barad, 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), yet touch and close physical proximity with the objects tends to be the primary prohibition in museum spaces. This prohibition is a direct act of power, as museums decide who gets to touch museum objects or even the casing protecting them. Some objects defined as less valuable can be touched by anyone, while other objects are not even to be seen by visitors: thousands of objects deemed irreplaceable are

conserved in storage. As a result, it may be deemed that such practices disregard the power of objects in bringing people together (see Latour, 2005), and in creating communities of solidarity.

In the workshops organized by Ekholm and Orenius (2021), the participants, and the makers of the *Egypt of Glory* exhibition, were encouraged to consider the displayed objects as beings that contain all their own history/herstory/theirstory; their creators, users, previous owners and robbers, as well as the histories of their materials; possibly even their feelings. During the workshops, the notion of value became a question of historical value, which in turn raised questions about whose histories they were perceived to carry or communicate.

Besides the value and the stories associated with the objects, the participants examined the importance of touch in creating meaningful and emotional connections with the objects and with the fingers and hands that have previously touched them. Touch was defined as physical, emotional, social and political. Touches were also recognized as leaving marks. When touch is prohibited, confined, structured or framed, sensuous being and relating with objects, people and histories/herstories/theirstories is restricted. In museum pedagogical practices, this indicates a denial of the importance of emotions and sensual presence in favor of the traditional gaze and cognition (e.g. the disembodied eye; Staniszewski, 1998). Not being able to touch and to be in touch with the museum content, dismisses the diverse embodied experiences of museum audiences, and further, deprives exhibits of their material potentialities and agencies (Barad, 2012; Haapalainen, 2021).

Further, touch has often been understood narrowly as being limited to touching museum artefacts with the fingers or hands, or accidentally bumping into an object or a display case, and with these assumptions come the associated prohibitions that are claimed to be in place to protect and to be looked at or contemplated. However, being in touch with an object

is a much broader notion, multisensory and intersectional (resembling the forces of diffraction described by Barad, 2003). In one of the Amos Rex workshops, the museum professionals engaged in an exercise involving clay. During this exercise they silently molded clay in the presence of the ancient objects. Afterwards, the participants shared their thoughts about their clay objects and about the experience of visiting the exhibition by touch. They were asked if they would want others to touch their object and in what way. The reactions and responses varied. This initiated discussions about the makers of the ancient artefacts: Were they meant to be preserved? Have they been misinterpreted? Who determines their value?

## **Conclusions**

Above all, dismantling oppressive ideals and structures requires action. Therefore, antinormative and anticolonial museum work call for the intersectional recognition of current privileges and of the social, economic and cultural structures that maintain these privileges. In practice, this would mean troubling the traditions and active unlearning processes (Kumashiro, 2002; Choi et al., 2018; Spivak, 2011). This eventually leads to disruptive and discomforting knowledges, interstices and, through these feelings, finally unlearning. Kumashiro (2002) describes disruptive feelings as a desirable part of anti-oppressive education, a way to change what we thought we already knew.

These approaches introduce nonverbal, embodied knowledge and sensuous epistemic orientation. They account for and enable embodied, emotional, sensuous relationality, being-with objects and others. They also actively question stagnant ideologies and normative practices that have created systems of oppression, marginalization and colonialism to continue and instigate further tragedies.

For example, in the *Egypt of Glory*-related workshops, the staff searched for ways to be in solidarity with objects and their colonial histories. Ekholm and Orenius designed the workshops to explore feelings regarding the ancient Egyptian objects. Grief, in particular, became a central emotion, and also a possible tool for anticolonial work. In this context, grief as an active and attentive process can change the ability to take on accountability, to be present with the emotions rather than the inclination to flee or to respond with defensiveness. Grief is not one sentiment but a constellation of many transitory emotions. Grief is a temporal process; to grieve is to create new relations and to bring new diversity into being with others and into personal and communal narrations. During a workshop, when discussing pain, grief, and accountability, a member of the museum staff commented that apart from sorrow and shame, they found relief in the collective aspect of grieving.

For museum pedagogies, creating shared spaces for grieving introduces the notion of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In practice, this means actualizing the gestures and actions of solidarity in the physical museum spaces, in the attitudes, rhythms, gazes, sentiments and ethical relations with and to others and the marginalized others or subalterns (see Spivak, 2011), bringing us to the need for activist solidarity. Art educators are in key positions when it comes to audience engagement, but whether or not the contents of the museum are accessible or inclusive has to be found in the foundations of the museum: the curation, the texts, the choices of exhibitions and collaborators, recruitment, and funding, to name but a few. However, to instigate true change, the conversation and scrutiny has to permeate the institution as a whole. One has to actively ponder even the most complex issues that may seem unresolvable and that do not readily submit to resolution. For example, within in a museum context, what are the possible experiences of a queer youth of immigrant backgrounds in relation to cultural heritage, and how might we overcome the forces of marginalization and repetitive discrimination?

Our cases urge us to understand museum practices and collaborations as intersectional, as a systemic whole where every decision and all minor details either work against or struggle toward a more anti-hegemonic, activist and solidarity museum. Intersectionality can be seen as a transformative force to undermine the central operational logics of museum and exhibition institutions and create simultaneous, alternative, temporal and open centers. It enables those ghosts and gasps, vibes and vibrations that actively question and requestion the museum institution to foster active solidarity. Intersectionality entails understanding that queer and anticolonial approaches should not only permeate but be established as a foundational orientation that guides all museum activities and agencies as well as collaborations between universities, NGOs and museum professionals. In order for solidarity to actualize, we have to unbuild, unlearn and undo the oppressive and hegemonic structures and categories of histories, museums, languages, human-human and human-nonhuman relations. This process of un-doing with care, grief and activist solidarity is what we suggest as a pivotal anticolonial and queering action in museum education.

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