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The Museo Textil: Creating Value and Accomplishing Change in the Art Museum

In recent museological scholarship, education and public engagement are increasingly viewed as the foci of museums. This has been accompanied by a prevalence, especially in science and natural history museums, of innovative exhibitions featuring multimedia and interactive elements. Meanwhile, many art museums remain characterized by “white cube” displays that privilege the aesthetic. As such they are sometimes viewed as less able to meaningfully engage and educate visitors, as isolated from everyday life. However, in 2008, an institution came into existence that inverts this relationship between exhibitionary style and capability, presenting a case of an art museum that intends to meaningfully engage its visitors and impact public life. The Museo Textil de Oaxaca (MTO) is a private museum in Oaxaca, Mexico. The museum’s goal is to support the large population of weavers in Oaxaca; they use a quintessential art-museum-style display to exhibit textiles, meant to convince visitors that textiles are art and increase their willingness to pay high prices for handmade textiles in the marketplace. The MTO thus mobilizes the art museum format in service of a tangible, counter-hegemonic social project; to cause visitors to revalue textiles as art, increase their market value, and better the lives of artisans. It negotiates the divide between conceptions of a conventional art museum and an institution instrumentally relevant to its surroundings. Drawing on material culture theory on value, especially that of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, this project will present analyses of the MTO’s exhibitions, workshops and internal culture that assert “white cube” displays as essential to the accomplishment of the MTO’s goal. By expanding Kopytoff and Appadurai’s conceptions of the biographies of things in asserting the multiple valuations of textiles simultaneously manifested through the art museum display, this project allots such exhibitionary styles new potential in a rapidly changing museum world.