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The ignorant art museum: beyond meaning-making

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of new museology and constructivist learning theories, the traditional unidirectional educational role of the museum has been contested and challenged. Museums have the potential to be progressive pedagogical sites and are an ideal terrain to explore educational theories and attitudes. Jacques Rancière, in his seminal book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), proposed a different view of what education should look like. This article explores what an 'ignorant art museum' practice can look like beyond meaning-making, through analysis of key actions, such as observing, repeating, failing, trying and verifying. Theorising on literature (philosophy and educational theory) and taking international examples, it will explore the benefits and issues created by such practices. What are the tensions between the museum as the site of the expert and the space of the public? What can a new form of museum expertise look like? How can technology contribute to the development of the 'ignorant museum'? What knowledge can be created in an 'ignorant museum' environment and how can this knowledge be displayed in the framework of the museum? By attempting to resolve these questions, this paper aims to look into the 'ignorant museum' as a strategy for change.

KEYWORDS

Rancière; art museum; ignorant museum; learning; knowledge production

Museums are contested sites, fields where conflicts become visible, where neoliberal agendas clash with 'public good' ambitions and where exclusionary tendencies collude with inclusive aspirations and community-based practices. In recent decades, new museology and various studies on participatory practices have challenged the traditional unidirectional educational role of the museum (Davallon, 1999; Dewey, 1916/2008; Mairesse & Desvallées, 2007; Marstine, 2006; McSweeney & Kavanagh, 2016; Sandell, 1998; Simon, 2010; Vergo, 1989). Some museums have been looking for a new pedagogical framework that would allow them to engage publics of all ages, that would be socially relevant and inclusive of diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and that would be representative of the multiple community voices in contemporary society. As remarked by Borg and Mayo, museums can be 'conceived of as sites of struggle, of cultural contestation and renewal' (2010, p. 37).

Museums, and art museums in particular, have the potential to be progressive pedagogical sites. They are not limited to a specific age group, making life-long learning one

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of their potential goals. Museums are not bound by the factual and cognitive output that drives various educational systems, and as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill remarks: 'knowledge is now well understood as the commodity that museums offer' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 2). While one has to stay sceptical, as Hooper-Greenhill is, of this perception of knowledge as commodity that inscribes the museum in a market logic, there is a notable shift in the perception of museums as sites of learning within the educational field and more generally in society.[1] Museums, and particularly art museums, are perceived as learning spaces where the knowledge produced is not reduced to the acquisition of information but also encompasses the development of diverse individual cognitive skills, such as analytical or critical skills, diverse individual emotional skills, such as empathy or creativity, a variety of psychomotor skills, such as looking at and moving around artworks, as well as social skills related to communication or normative museum behaviour. Knowledge production in art museums is about giving the public the ability to acquire skills to generate further knowledge.

But as we mentioned, not all museums are equal when it comes to addressing diversity and to sharing power with communities. As Clover notes: 'Public art galleries and museums do take sides' (Clover, 2015, p. 303). It is important to note here, that many museums still hold on to a very antiquated view of museum education (as a unidirectional system), of learning (as integrating the museum-approved narrative) and of knowledge (as factual knowledge held solely by experts). In these environments the kind of knowledge that can be acquired and the ways of learning are extremely limited. Furthermore, the apparent neutrality of museums' discourse and invisibility of their positioning can lead to a reinforcement of oppressive and exclusionary structures (Bal, 1996; Clover, 2015). Museums choose who will be represented, how and what dominant discourse will be adopted (Bal, 1996; Borg & Mayo, 2010; Jordan & Weedon, 1995). Others have addressed how museums can become 'institutions [that can] trouble identity, decolonise, mock, revisualise, tell alternative stories, reorient authoritative practice, interrogate intolerance and privilege and stimulate critical literacies' (Clover, 2015, p. 301). Some museums indeed are able and willing to critically engage with learners and take socially conscious positions. It is these museums that we look at in this article. It is precisely this issue of intentionality that is key here. Intentionality is not just a museum's mission statement, but how this statement is implemented in every aspects of the life of the museum as Abram showed in the case of the Tenement museum (Abram, 2005).

What then is 'emancipatory cultural education' in the context of the museum? Is it about representation and the 'the foregrounding of genuine faces and voices' (Borg & Mayo, 2010, p. 39)? Is it about visibility and sharing of processes (Bal, 1996; Clover, 2015)? Is it about developing a critical pedagogy (Borg & Mayo, 2010; Freire, 1970)? In the context of this article, we define emancipatory as developing intellectual freedom in the visitor (as advocated by Jacques Rancière). It seems to us that developing a capacity for intellectual freedom is an essential pre-requisite to then tackle issues of representation, visibility and power distribution.

Jacque Rancière's seminal text *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987) offered, at the time it was written, an alternative voice in a general debate around school equality and education. The ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Althusser and Jean-Claude Milner dominated that debate. In his work, Rancière presented equality as a prerequisite to education rather than the goal and potential result of competent education. It is precisely his stance on equality of intelligence that makes him so relevant in today's knowledge society, where some institutions have refocused on the democratisation of knowledge.[2]

Recently, Yuha Jung in her text 'The ignorant museum: Transforming the elitist museum into an inclusive learning place' proposed merging Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and Rancière's emancipatory education principles to create an 'ignorant museum'. The aim would be to reduce elitism in the institution (Jung, 2010). While the 'ignorant museum' is a fruitful concept, we do not see that concept solely as a means to reduce elitism in museums (even though this is highly desirable). The ignorant museum principles can also be a way to explore new pedagogical roles the museum could play in knowledge creation and investigate how this concept could be used as a strategy for change.

Rancière and Freire, while both opposed to a 'banking model' of education propose different routes of transformation. Freire focuses on collective critical education to encourage socio-political analysis and action (Freire, 1970). Rancière on the other hand, emphasises personal intellectual freedom and is somewhat more detached from social and economical aims. Rancière's goal is not social change, he even claims that the proposed 'ignorant schoolmaster' model cannot lead to social change but only to moments of social lucidity (Rancière, 1991, pp. 96, 97). Therefore when we talk about a strategy for change in the context of Rancière's ignorant museum, it is not a social or economical change (even though these may be some of the indirect consequences of such model) but an intellectual and individual change.

This article proposes first to investigate the concept of the ignorant museum further with the help of constructivist learning theories to see how it can contribute to an expanded view of knowledge creation in the art museum. This investigation will be followed by an exploration of the ignorant art museum as an emancipator going beyond meaning-making. Issues of expertise will then be considered, questioning the tensions between the museum as a site of expertise and a public forum. We will ask what new forms of museum expertise could look like within the framework of the ignorant museum. Finally, we will consider what possibilities new digital technologies can offer to the ignorant museum. Throughout the article examples will be used to illustrate the issues highlighted and show how museums can facilitate emancipatory adult education in museums. The examples have been chosen as indicative of a shift in practice and a general interest (and we hope movement) towards this type of adult education. Many museums are already working in this direction and this article proposes a theoretical framework that may help think about such practices further and expand these practices in more radical ways.

The ignorant museum and knowledge production

Rancière developed the principles of the ignorant schoolmaster on the basis of the experiments and publications of Joseph Jacotot, a nineteenth-century French professor in Louvain. Jacotot's pedagogical experiments started from the principle that all intelligences are equal, that is to say that everybody can understand what other people have done and understood (Rancière, 1987, p. 9). To Jacotot and to Rancière the difference in intellectual performance comes down to the learner's will and capacity for emancipation, which translates in the learner's attention to learning. To Rancière for each individual 'there is a will that commands and an intelligence that obeys' (Rancière, 1991, p. 25). The main obstacle to learning to Rancière and Jacotot is distraction/absence (Rancière, 1987, p. 94). Rancière established a clear distinction between two approaches to education. To universal teaching, based on trust and actualisation of the learner's capacity, he opposed the explicative system. In the

explicative system existing knowledge is passed onto the learner in a simplified (therefore stultified) form through the explications of the teacher. To him, 'the logic of explication calls for the principle of a regression ad infinitum' (Rancière, 1991, p. 4). To Jacotot and Rancière, learning and understanding are two equivalent acts of translation between the world and the individual (Rancière, 1987, p. 20). Intelligence is therefore defined as the capacity to make yourself understood and to verify your knowledge with others, which implies equality with that other. Rancière concludes: *Equality* and *intelligence* are synonymous terms, exactly like *reason* and *will* (Rancière, 1991, p. 73).

Rancière and Jacotot's position on learning closely matches constructivist learning theories. George Hein distinguished between four educational models in the museum environment depending on the museum's view of theories of knowledge and learning. On one hand, knowledge can be considered as existing outside the learner; on the other, knowledge is constructed by the learner individually or socially. As for learning, on one hand learning is perceived as a series of incremental additions, and on the other the learner constructs her/his knowledge (Figure 1):

From these distinctions Hein proposed four educational models for museums:

- the didactic/expository model where knowledge exists outside the learner and the learner learns incrementally,
- the discovery model where knowledge exists outside the learner but the learner construct her/his own knowledge,
- the stimulus-response model where knowledge is created by the learner and the learner learns incrementally,
- and the constructivist model where the learner constructs her/his own knowledge and knowledge is created by the learner (Hein, 1998).

It is this last model that interests us here. Recently this constructivist postulate has been adopted and/or questioned by many museums. It also closely matches Rancière's ideals, as

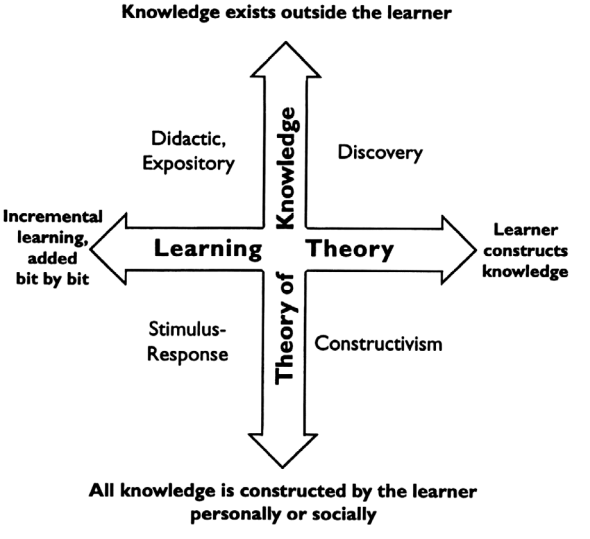

Figure 1. Hein's model of educational theories (Hein, 1998, p. 25).

learners are encouraged to use their own intelligence and existing interests to construct their own knowledge. Furthermore, the main referent of this newly created knowledge is the learner her/himself: knowledge needs to make sense in the world of that learner. The constructivist approach to museum education has been extensively studied, but it leaves aside an essential element of Rancière's model: that of the equality of intelligence.

What would the two pedagogical methods outlined by Rancière – the explicative method and universal education – look like in the art museum? The explicative system can be likened to the traditional way in which museums see their educational role. An expert (a curator, an educator or academic) explicates the artwork and transfers factual knowledge to the visitor. The main knowledge creator is the museum staff and the museum's pedagogical role is to transfer this existing knowledge to a visitor considered as an empty vessel. Knowledge is, in this case, conceptualised mostly as factual information rather than a set of cognitive, emotional or psychomotor skills allowing for the production of further knowledge by the learners themselves. The educational apparatus associated with this approach is the traditional museum teaching/learning dispositive, such as labels, lectures, conventional guided tours. In this model the meaning of the artwork is locked in – or at least limited by – the interpretation of the expert. The visitor is seen as a recipient of that knowledge and the object's learning potential is limited to the approach chosen by the museum. This implies that the museum's narrative (regardless of it bias) is dominant and the intentionality is not to share power, foster critical thinking or create new knowledge. In that model the institution's intention is not emancipatory. When brought back to Hein's models, this approach is typical of the didactic/expository model and even, to some extent, the discovery model as the learner is guided towards set pre-existing knowledge. Beyond the educational apparatus, the space of the museum also reflects this explicative logic. In most traditional art museums artworks are organised in a chronological, geographical or thematic way, which leads the interpretation process and possible comparisons and networks created by the visitors during their visit.

Simultaneously, art museums are increasingly embracing alternative pedagogical methods and Rancière's idea of universal education is finding an echo in such alternative practices. For example, co-creation projects, participatory programmes and crowd-sourced digital projects create a new set of tools that have been added to some art museum's educational apparatus. Such approaches offer agency to the visitors in terms of what and how they learn, shifting the balance of power from the institution to the individual learner and to some measure introducing critical pedagogical practices in the museum. Following the constructivist ideals, in such contexts knowledge is often produced by participants and staff together. Instead of being firmly on the side of verifiable factual knowledge, a lot of the knowledge produced in that context has to do with diverse individual cognitive, emotional, psychomotor and social skills, allowing for further individual knowledge production and learning how to learn. Such projects could be seen as the first steps towards using the idea of the ignorant museum as a strategy for change, where the aim

> is not to create scholars. It is to raise up those who believe themselves inferior in intelligence, to make them leave the swamp where they are stagnating – not the swamp of ignorance, but the swamp of self-contempt, of contempt *in and of itself* for the reasonable creature. It is to make emancipated and emancipating men. (Rancière, 1991, pp. 101, 102)

The trust in the participants and the value given to the knowledge created by the public paves the way to an emancipatory pedagogical museum practice. This is where the difference

between Freire's position and Rancière's become apparent. Emancipatory here is understood as an individual process in a non-formal environment.

Beyond meaning-making: the ignorant museum as emancipator

But how is emancipating the visitor any different from the traditional individual process of meaning-making currently happening in art museums? As Ferguson explains, in art exhibitions 'meanings are impossibly unstable […]. With works of art, meanings are only produced in context and that is a collective, negotiated, debated and shifting consensual process of determination' (Ferguson, Greenberg, & Nairne, 1996, p. 186). The key here is the difference between meaning-making and knowledge production in art museums. The two terms are often conflated, but imply a different emphasis. Meaning-making is centred on the object. The process of meaning-making is one where individuals and society as a whole give an object value, aura and/or status. Meaning-making starts as soon as the object is selected to enter the museum by a small group of experts, rather than in its interaction with visitors. The validation of the meaning attributed to the object is independent from the individual learner's response; rather, it is anchored in a collective and negotiated societal response. This meaning is in great part controlled by institutional narratives (Bal, 1996). In essence, meaning-making focuses on the intrinsic value of the work of art rather than its impact on the learner. Knowledge production on the other hand is centred on the learner. It is about what knowledge the learner creates from the object. The relation to the object is different and the value of the work of art is extrinsic. Objects are then seen as agents, as framework, as catalysers of knowledge production. Like the book *Télémaque* in Rancière's example, objects can be considered as the *chose commune* (the thing in common) (Rancière, 1987, p. 8). Objects are then the minimal link to the learner, her/his starting point to weave knowledge onto and around. The learner, rather than the object or the institutional discourse, is at the heart of knowledge production, which makes this practice emancipatory in Rancière's understanding of the term. It is the knowledge production that occurs here that interests us.

Art museums are privileged sites of knowledge production, while artworks themselves are ideal catalysers of knowledge production for several reasons. First, the intention of the artist, while acknowledged, doesn't stand as the final authority on an artwork's significance or meaning. This means an artwork is a flexible enough 'thing in common' to allow for diverse forms of learning. Secondly, the public is accustomed to the idea that art objects have extrinsic value. For example, it is often stated that art can be used to study historical periods, to develop empathy, for medical benefits or to improve mathematical skills. In Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a whole section is dedicated to painting and its educational potential (1987, pp. 111–114). To him, art education is not about making great painters but about stimulating individuals to identify with an artist's intention, recognise emotions and empathise. Art is about teaching through empathy.[3]

To encourage visitors to go beyond meaning-making to a focus on knowledge production, the learning cycle proposed by Rancière can provide a useful guideline. Key actions such as observing, remembering, comparing, repeating, failing, trying, combining and verifying allow the visitor to create new links between the object and a broad range of knowledge and to link this newly created knowledge back to the materiality of the 'thing in common'. To Rancière, the comparison of existing knowledge with new facts is an important step in the

learning process (Rancière, 1987, p. 21). The artwork in such a context is therefore both a catalyser and an object of study. The role of the ignorant museum is then to create a circle of learning that learners can navigate themselves. The ignorant schoolmaster-museum needs to remove its intelligence from the learning process of the visitor so the learner is free to use her/his intelligence to get a grip on the problem at hand or, in the art museum's case, the artwork displayed (Rancière, 1987, p. 25). The main educational role of the ignorant museum is then to create a context, choosing and presenting objects in an engaging and stimulating way, and in doing so, escaping from the explicatory logic of the traditional museum. Rancière advocates that this should be done with no subordination of intelligence and in a simple will-to-will relationship. Another interesting – and challenging – aspect is that according to Rancière, the learner should be able to ask anything from the object and so the will to communicate is essential (this is valid both for the schoolmaster/museum and the learner) (1987, p. 106). In practice, this means the learner needs to tell and guess (Rancière, 1987, p. 109). Rancière describes this process as asking what one sees, what one thinks and what one relates it to, and notes that all that is said needs to be proven, related and anchored in the materiality of the object, the 'thing in common'. Knowledge is verified in the materiality of the object (Rancière, 1987, pp. 36, 37). This process is very close to traditional critical visual analysis methods and can be implemented in art museums in a relatively easy way.

An excellent example is the Van Abbemuseum's 'DIY archive: Make your own exhibition' (Eindhoven, the Netherlands). The Van Abbemuseum is well known for its social and experimental stance. In a specific area of the museum, which is part exhibition space, part storage room, visitors are invited to look through the racks at original artworks, then to select, manipulate and research them, before laying them out on the walls in their own exhibition. The role of the staff here is to talk with the participants, ensure the artworks are manipulated so as not to be damaged and, if requested, to advise the learners. The learners are in control of the activity. The learners observe the works, other learners' behaviours and displays. They remember what they have seen in the rest of the museum and exhibitions they have experienced in the past. They compare the works on the racks between each other and with works they already know. They place works next to each other, they try, they fail, they combine artworks, they look again and argue for their choice of combination, bringing everything back to the artworks themselves. The knowledge created here by the learner and for the learner is significant. It is factual knowledge – who created this work, when, how; it is cognitive knowledge and skills – analytical skills, critical skills, networking skills (creating links between the artworks); it is emotional knowledge – creativity and empathy in particular; it is psychomotor skills – how to manipulate artworks for example; it is social and communication skills – how to explain their choices and communicate the main concept behind their selection. This new knowledge created by the learner makes sense in the learner's own world. But this new knowledge is also, to some measure, acknowledged and validated by the museum. The visitor has the option to fill in a card explaining her/his selection. Curators then select some exhibitions and display them in a more permanent way in another area of the museum. Such a set up creates a context for participants to build their own knowledge. It acknowledges the participants as intellectual equals and creates a similar learning circle as advocated by Rancière (observing, remembering, comparing, repeating, failing, trying, combining and verifying) and the learner resolves that circle based on her/his will and her/his own intelligence.

With such set-ups, art museums have the potential to act as emancipators for adults as well as for younger audiences, diverse social classes and under-represented cultural groups. This kind of approach allows for an expanded definition of knowledge. Such emancipatory practices in the Rancierian sense of the term potentially stimulate deep change in the learner and the institution. The learner gains intellectual independence and the institution acts as an emancipator. However, one must note that through the choice of objects to be examined, the institution still controls the dominant discourse. For example it is unlikely that a visitor in the DIY archive will reflect on what is not there. In a Rancierian perspective of intellectual emancipation, this is not necessary because the focus is on the knowledge built by the learner. Of course, if a Freiran emancipation is the goal, then this sort of practice does not go far enough and the selection of what goes in the DIY archive should be left to the public. Once again intentionality should be reflected upon here. The DIY archive deliberately creates a space for discussion about the collection. But for a deeper change to take place, the trust needs to go beyond education and display and into matters of governance. The Tenement museum is a particularly interesting example in that regard (Abram, 2005).

Issues of expertise: the Museums as site of expertise or public forum?

In such Rancierian emancipatory practices the tensions between the museum as a site of expertise and the museum as a public forum become clear. How can a museum create a new public life through such intervention? How can a museum be simultaneously a centre of expertise and a public forum?

As Hans Ulrich Obrist expressed at a recent conference, as a curator 'you don't start with the arrogance of the master plan, you start with a doubt, a question' (Obrist, 2017, n.p.). But for such emancipatory practices to take place the prerequisite is the 'confidence in the intellectual capacity of any human being' (Rancière, 1991, p. 14) and the desire to push the visitors to use their own intelligence. One often sees a certain degree of resistance from expert staff in museums as they see their role threatened and feel their existing knowledge is being devalued. But this is not the case. This knowledge needs to be used differently. Rancière distinguishes between the sharing of the emancipator (and artist), which is based on empathy and equality of intelligence, and the sharing of the explicator, which is based on external knowledge and inequality (Rancière, 1987, p. 120). This act of giving value to the visitor's intelligence is but a shift in goal and in means of communication. The goal of the museum curator and educator cannot then be limited to transmitting factual knowledge. This factual knowledge is still useful when creating learning frameworks and situations for the learner, but factual knowledge should not be at the centre of the communication process.[4] This shift in goal is necessary so the museum can be used in an emancipatory way; the museum needs to let go of controlling the knowledge created by the visitors. As Rancière notes, 'whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe' (Rancière, 1991, p. 18). Museums, because they are not schools and are already mostly adhering to the concept of free-choice learning – as no specific output is expected – are in an ideal position to experiment with this stance (Falk & Dierking, 2002). But it implies, as in the DIY archive project, a trust in the public and a loss of control by the institution over what knowledge is created and what results can be expected.

On top of this shift in goal, museums also need to develop a new sort of expertise that has more to do with multidirectional and layered communication (Elffers & Sitzia, 2016; Simon, 2010). Museums need to become expert at creating learning environments (Rancière's learning circle), choosing objects and questions (Rancière's 'thing in common') and developing improvisation skills to respond to the learner's needs (Rancière, 1987, p. 73). An example of attempting this shift in expertise is the newly launched Tate Exchange. Tate Exchange is a long-term project by Tate Modern (London, UK) that commits to finding new ways to reach and collaborate with audiences. It was launched in September 2016 and the theme of the year, 'exchange', is organised by the museum and artist Tim Etchells (Tate Exchange, n.d.). In recent years, Tate Modern has seen its focus shift to audiences and social commitment. Tate Exchange is first of all a space. This museum space has changed in nature and has shifted from a focus on the display and protection of objects and the traditional explicatory logic of the exhibition, towards an open, flexible environment. Tate Exchange is conceptualised as an 'integrated learning and gallery space' (Tate Modern, n.d.). The museum here sees its role as creating context and the right environment (material, affective, etc.) for knowledge production within an institutional framework. In its communication with the public Tate Exchange presents itself as an enabler of the many voices of diverse communities and a promoter of equality:

> Whether you are an observer, commentator, researcher, creator, hacker, tweeter or just curious, join international artists and organisations to explore the issues of our time. Drop in for a talk, join the conversation, enjoy a chance encounter and learn something new. (http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/tate-exchange)

This presentation is also a way to shift visitors' expectations of art museum visits from a traditional guided didactic experience asserting the authoritative voice of the institution, to an open intellectual relationship, allowing for discussion and interpretation and co-creation of knowledge.

However, Tate Exchange is also a programme and some tensions are visible here. The institution shifts between its role as an ignorant schoolmaster, presenting objects or questions and letting the public respond, and the Socratic method that implies an existing set of knowledge to be acquired. For example, the 'Waste not Want not' participatory project dedicated to class identity politics focuses on visitors creating their own knowledge and firmly positions Tate Exchange as an emancipatory agent. On the other hand, the lecture 'The Question of Globalization and Asia in Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1990s' is very much working within an explicatory logic asserting the authority and expertise of museum staff. Even in a space committed to finding new ways of communicating with the public, the tension between the museum as an emancipatory public forum and a space of expertise is tangible.

For the museum to be able to play its role as Rancierian emancipator new capacities need to be built. The first capacity necessary is that of creating a joint community between staff and visitors on equal footing. Etienne Wenger's 'community of practice' can be useful to better understand the link between the emancipatory role of the museum and the creation of a joint community. Wenger argues that 'learning happens in the relationship between the social and the individual' (Wenger-Trayner, Omidvar, & Kislov, 2014, p. 271). It is the interaction, the act of communication, that anchors the learning. As Rancière argued, it is in dialogue with the other that one truly understands. For Wenger, communities of practice are linked around basic components such as meaning, identity, community and practice

(all key elements in the learning process) (Wenger, 2009, p. 211). In such a community the museum staff becomes a learner in the same way the public already is. In this way intellectual equality is established and the object, the 'thing in common', becomes a starting point for learning and a meeting point between emancipated visitors, artists and institutional experts, all learners in their own right.

The second capacity that museums need to develop to become emancipatory is that of mediation. Museums need to become expert in communicating and mediating between diverse institutions, societal partners, artists and the public in a multi-voiced and interactive way. Museums need to stimulate engagement and move to a position of 'listener' as they attempt to shift the relationship with these potential partners so as to become equal collaborators in the creation of knowledge, in the exhibition of content and in the design of learning circles. Museums have traditionally been sites of research on objects. This research practice needs to shift from the object itself to the way in which objects can be used as a 'thing in common' to stimulate knowledge creation for all partners involved. They also need to become expert in displaying not only object-based research but also the knowledge created by visitors, other institutions and societal partners. Through this work on communication with societal partners and the public they will also develop a crucial third capacity.

This third capacity has to do with the ability of the museum to be responsive to social, cultural or political issues. Nina Simon, in her book *The Art of Relevance*, insists that relevance is a key for the public to access and create new knowledge (Simon, 2016). She states that:

> experts define relevance as more than a link. In the words of cognitive scientists Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber, relevance 'yields positive cognitive effect.' Something is relevant if it gives you new information, if it adds meaning to your life, if it makes a difference to you. It's not enough for something to be familiar or connected to something you already know. Relevance leads you somewhere. It brings new value to the table. (Simon, 2016, p. 29)

Working with external partners and responding to the public helps the museum select a relevant range of topics, research them and create learning circles. But to achieve relevance and to be responsive museums need to develop their capacity for improvisation in terms of interpretation of content, in terms of mediation and presentation of results. The knowledge created within an ignorant museum is (and should be) unpredictable, that is, it should respond to the learners' interest and existing knowledge. As Rancière noted:

> To teach what one doesn't know is simply to ask questions about what one doesn't know. Science isn't needed to ask such questions. The ignorant one can ask anything, and for the voyager in the land of signs, his questions alone will be true questions compelling the autonomous exercise of his intelligence. (Rancière, 1991, p. 30)

But accept this notion of the ignorant museum requires the museum to ask questions they do not have answers to, to accept that expertise in asking questions is as valuable as object-based expertise, to be responsive and to not shy away from improvisation. The art museum needs to accept its status both as a centre of expertise and a public forum.

This shift in expertise doesn't mean a loss of other types of expertise. One of the main challenges of abandoning the explicatory function of the museum and the directive role of the educator and of developing a community of practice is the risk of degenerating into a laissez-faire pedagogy – an exercise in shared ignorance. If done with a genuine intent of knowledge creation this outcome is unlikely. In Rancière's text, the starting point is one of shared ignorance. But it is a starting point; the process (observing, repeating, failing, trying and verifying) ensures a gradual building of knowledge on both parts. Another risk is that of

the reinforcement of existing bias due to the selection of objects by the museum. In order to reduce this risk the museum needs to acknowledge and make transparent potential bias in their existing collections. Transparency and intentionality are key values in the Rancierian emancipatory role the museum can play.

Digital technologies: a way to fast-forward the ignorant museum?

Digital technologies are often hailed as a way forward for museums. If we consider the capacities that need developing (community building, mediation, improvisation), digital technologies may indeed hold part of the answer.

First, the potential of digital technologies for community building should be considered. Museums have been using social media relatively successfully to gather sets of followers and sub-groups interested in similar topics. To push this further, museums need to integrate social media into their daily practice (rather than keeping it segregated as a marketing add-on). The museum staff needs to engage in a multi-directional discussion with the public and other societal partners to contribute to the creation of communities. Creating communities of practice through social media is far from impossible (the Stamp Collecting Forum or the Scratch programming community show how niche such communities of practice can be). Projects, such as the Digital Human Library for example, that put in contact groups of schoolchildren with experts in various fields, create a greater sense of belonging and accessibility of the expert. It also allows for individuals to build their own knowledge connected to experts and become experts themselves. But for museums to be successful in this endeavour (creating a community of learner around and reinforcing their own expertise) they need to create an environment based upon an equal footing and ensure excellent mediation.

Mediation, that is the layering of digital information, accessibility of the information and engagement in dialogue, is then key to achieving universal education. Again, these elements are far from being impossible goals. For example, the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) has developed an app, 'Touch Van Gogh', that offers a layering of information covering a broad range of topics, including X-ray images of the paintings, hidden details, information on the painter's technique and the location and history of the painting. (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). But this app is still developed in an explicatory and unidirectional logic. Even in a Rancierian logic, this explicatory and unidirectional logic is a hindrance to learning. It doesn't allow for the learner to grow her/his own knowledge independently. There are still specific areas towards which the institution directs the learner. It doesn't allow for 'critical confrontation' (Borg & Mayo, p. 41), a questioning of the existing knowledge of the individual. Furthermore, it is directing the knowledge acquisition process leaving no room for making visible the learner's knowledge production. Personalisation and responsivity should be considered.

Narratives have been (rightfully) used as a key tool to construct the framework of knowledge creation in the museum. However, they are mostly narratives of a discursive nature (as in the Van Gogh museum app) that are trying to explicate the objects and put them in context, rather than functioning within the emancipatory principle. If one wants to move towards a model that is more personal and interactive and that creates greater potential for emancipation, the learner needs to be in control of the knowledge creation process. In their study 'Interaction and narrative' looking at video games, Michael Mateas and Andrew

Stern made an interesting distinction between interactivity, narrative and emergent narrative. They stated that in the gaming world (from which museums can learn a lot about creating learning circles), narrative and interactivity are often seen as opposite (Mateas & Stern, 2005, p. 2) and so they arrive at a concept of 'emergent narrative'. They explain that an 'emergent narrative is concerned with providing a rich framework within which individual players can construct their own narratives, or groups of players can engage in the shared social construction of narratives' (Mateas & Stern, 2005, p. 2). This structuring model would allow for a type of mediation contributing to the creation of communities of practice. In a museum, 'emergent narrative' would mean that the exhibition space would be merely a framework allowing for individual narratives to be constructed by visitors using objects as a support for their own individualised knowledge production. The use of emergent narrative, with learners driving the learning process, combined with the social media aspect and the layering of information, would allow for the creation of communities.

Another possible use for digital technologies is the display of the knowledge created. In order to acknowledge the equality of the intellectual value of the knowledge created by the museum staff and each visitor this knowledge needs to become visible. The Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, Australia, created an app 'FLoat' that focuses on emotional engagement with the artworks. It uses geo-location (WiFi fingerprinting) to ask visitors to share their emotions linked to their interaction with specific artworks (Ian Potter Museum of Art, n.d.). The app allows every visitor to see what other visitors have shared. While it limits the visibility of the knowledge created to emotional knowledge and is still relatively unidirectional, it provides a starting point for further knowledge development, using the artwork as the 'thing in common'. Curator Francesco Manacorda puts the idea of co-creation of the visual display at the core of his practice. He notes that 'if we want a museum of commons, we cannot design it to involve the public. We need to design it with the public' (Manacorda, 2016, p. 7).

This use of technology would reinforce the key capacities that need developing in museums: community building, mediation and improvisation. In doing so, museums would promote emancipatory goals and facilitate key actions in emancipatory learning such as observing, repeating, failing, trying and verifying, while making visible the individuals' learning processes. Museums would offer a flexibility and personalisation for the visitors (also in terms of the choice of 'chose commune') that in their current traditional form museums cannot offer.

The emancipatory practices of an ignorant museum have the potential to bring about deep changes in the relationship between art museums and the public, but also changes in society at large. By promoting equality of intelligence, the ignorant museum can support life-long learning, ensure inclusivity and representativity, as well as institutional relevance. Rancerian emancipation, that is the development of individual intellect, engagement and critical capacity, can be seen as a first step towards an emancipated visitor in the Freiran sense of the term. The main challenge is the repositioning of the art museum between a centre of expertise and a public forum, a challenge that can be tackled by embracing new kinds of expertise to do with building communities of practice (including visitors and staff), with mediation and with improvisation. Digital technologies have been identified as a potential aid to improving these aspects of museum work.

It would also be interesting to consider how far the ignorant museum practices could be spread within an institution. Could we imagine a museum trying out such emancipatory

practices in matters of collecting and governance? Following in the footsteps of some art and ethnography museums working with source communities, the involvement in collecting and governance of members of various communities would limit issues related to colonial history, elitist or sexist practices. It would certainly increase the transparency of many decision-making processes and create a true sense of public ownership.

Another interesting line for further investigation would be what structure could such an ignorant museum have? It seems that the Rhizome model introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) could be fruitful in regards to making visible the multiple networks of knowledge created by staff and visitors. The Rhizome as an organic system can trace and document shifting relationships and simultaneously present multiple viewpoints. What this could look like in museums would need to be further investigated.

In the view that 'creating means and opportunities to advance the types of new literacies required to understand and act in the world is an important preoccupation and goal of adult education' (Clover, 2015, p. 309), Rancière's ignorant museum has an important contribution to make. The ignorant museum has a transformative potential and further research needs to be done investigating concrete case studies of if and how such a pedagogy lead to institutional and individual visitor's transformation. The ignorant museum concept can be used by institutions as a strategy for change in order to balance the scale of power. As Rancière put it, 'there is only one power, that of seeing and speaking, of paying attention to what one sees and says' (Rancière, 1991, p. 26).

Notes

1. This shift is also visible in institutional, regional and EU policy documents for example.
2. It is important to note here that, while some institutions have refocused on the democratization of knowledge, collaboration, inclusion and critical approaches, others have embraced a neoliberal vision of knowledge and focused on its commodification (concentrating on edutainment, blockbuster exhibition and heritage tourism) or emphasized the instrumental and pragmatic aspect of adult education. One end of the spectrum is represented here: the one promoting public educational goals and creating an informed and engaged citizenry. We cautiously hope this will become mainstream practice in view of the social and cultural benefits it brings along with it.
3. In that regard, the object chosen as a catalyzer is of much less importance as it does not direct the narrative, the individual visitor does. Institutions are still in charge of creating the circle of learning and therefore do not lose completely control of the overall museum narrative. In that sense, by choosing objects, museums do not offer a complete liberation of museum visitors in a Freirean sense, as the choice of the object is still problematic in terms of representation, inclusion, and power balance.
4. Let us note here that this factual/content expertise is very necessary for other key functions of the museum such as conserving and collecting.

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