

INVENTING A RELATIONAL MUSEUM

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Janusz Byszewski, Beata Nessel-Łukasik, *Muzeum relacyjne. Przed progiem / za progiem*, introduction and afterword
Iwona Kurz, Robert Supeł, *Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, Muzeum Józefa Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku, Warszawa 2020*, pp. 181

The book *Relational Museum. Before the Threshold / Beyond the Threshold* inaugurates the 'Museology – New Places' series published by the Museum of the King John III's Palace at Wilanów in cooperation with the Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek. It is precisely the latter, founded in 2008 and opened to the public in 2020 that becomes the prototype and laboratory of the title 'relational museum'. The unifying force of this concept which the whole book is dedicated to is the concentration on multi-dimensional relations of a museum as an institution with the local community. The book's authors are Beata Nessel-Łukasik, employee at the Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek, co-creating the Museum's concept, and currently head of the innovative Local Programmes Department at the Museum, as well as Museum's affiliate Janusz Bryszewski, an artist and culture animator. As remains to be seen the Authors purposefully single out the issue of authorship, since already on the book's title page they signal acknowledgements to 'Museum's Neighbours' cooperation with whom yields the discussed publication.

The introduction to the volume written by Robert Supła, Director of the Piłsudski Museum, bears a meaningful title 'Neighbourhood'. The author briefly sketches the institution's genealogy, he reminds the readers the circumstances in which the Piłsudskis came to live in Sulejówek, and also Piłsudski's legend, already circulating within his lifetime, and its future history, particularly how it was *triumphantly revived* (p. 9) around the transformation period. At that time the concept was conceived how to develop the former Piłsudskis' estate together with its neighbourhood into the museum format. Supeł shows the framework conditions of the newly-established institutions: space (three historic buildings, the park complex, the decision to raise a new building), the formal-organizational sphere (Public-Private

Partnership between the Józef Piłsudski Family Foundation and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, with the participation of the Sulejówek local government), and finally, which is possibly the most interesting from the point of view of museum studies, the assumptions made by the Museum's authors.

Thus, it was firstly conceived as a large-scale institution (comparable to the largest new 21st-century Polish historical museums: the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising, the Museum of the Second World War, the European Solidarity Centre). Secondly, its distinguishing feature, almost unique in the Polish museum landscape is the 'success factor': *the story of the triumph form the past century* (p. 9). Thirdly, it is to form part of the so-called narrative museum trend, which is here understood as a *museum in which a story takes the central part, it is contained in exhibition contents and in the character of programme activities, as well as in the form [...], or finally in the form of constructing the Museum collection* (p. 9).

Fourthly, and it is here that we reach the motifs particularly interesting to us from the point of view of the discussed publication, Supeł speaks of the manner of designing the Museum's activity whose goal is obviously to serve the purpose of promoting the values related to Piłsudski. Such an identification could form the starting point of any project of patriotic education subdued to the aims of historical policy. The Museum's authors single out this issue pointing to the tasks faced by the Museum: how to realistically create conditions for becoming acquainted with this figure and those values, when the factor which actually contributes to the figure's 'heavy weight', namely the legend, recognizability, popularity of the widespread associations, may equally easy overwhelm one, bore, discourage from interaction (actually, just as those elements which contribute to the Museum's

grand scale do). Therefore, among the Museum's main tasks it is not commemorating and celebrating Piłsudski which are enumerated, but *facilitating of overcoming subsequent barriers: the myth barrier, the museum's threshold, and the barrier of the neighbour's door* standing between the visitor and Piłsudski, *creation of conditions for a real dialogue* (p. 11). At this point what appears is relationality of key importance for the book: establishing bonds with the public which are the departure point for cognition and dialogue. The subsequent part of the book consistently presents these Museum activities over the first years of its existence which reach *the deepest into the nature of the delicate mechanism of establishing relations between a cultural institution and its public* (p. 11).

The second introductory text authored by Byszewski and Nessel-Lukasik is titled 'A Curatorial Tour': tour of the book itself. The Authors claim in it that it was in the course of forming the Sulejówek museum that an organically created philosophical concept of the relational museum mentioned in the title was being conceived. The concept refers to, e.g. theories of ecomuseum and participatory museum important in contemporary studies on museums, but it stems, first of all, from the unobvious today inspiration derived from the *legacy of counter-culture and the philosophy of independent theatre* (p. 19) from the second half of the 20th century (e.g., the activity of the Laboratory Theatre). As emphasized by Byszewski at several moments in the book, it was also the thought of Józef Tischner with the emphasis on the philosophy of the encounter that proved important.

In the context of contemporary changes in the understanding of culture, public sphere, and the very definition of a 'museum', sometimes there emerges the conviction that cultural communities and traditional identity models weaken. The Authors' considerations, however, question this attitude moving more towards the potential of the museum: a relational museum as a kind of *a binder or social connector for various communities* (p. 20), numerous and dynamic, among whom locality plays an important role. What results as a consequence of such an attitude is the emphasis Byszewski and Nessel-Lukasik put on the multi-authorship and multi-voice to be represented in the volume: even if really many *individuals who engaged themselves in respective Museum's projects, supported [them] (...) in the role of co-creators of respective situations* (p. 20) are not authors of definite texts in the volume in the traditional meaning of the term, they should be seen as co-creators of the 'relational museum' the picture of whose creation and functioning is to emerge from reading the discussed book.

The 'narrative' on *shaping the social impact of a modern museum on its own ecosystem* (p. 18) is continued in Nessel-Lukasik's text 'The Vanguard' in which the Author describes the beginnings: both organizational, and so to say, ideological ones of the activity of interest to us. Thus, the paper answers the question what made the Piłsudski Museum expose so much the 'local-cum-community-creative' dimension of their activity, which obviously is present in strategic documents of the majority of cultural institutions, although their declarations are often of pretext, secondary character. After all, following many other historical museums, the Piłsudski Museum could treat this sphere more as the background to promoting its permanent exhibition and shaping of the image of the past focused on it.

Nessel-Lukasik goes back to 2013, showing that at that initial stage also the Museum, which was only being organized, did not maintain too frequent and satisfactory relations with the local community. She describes how the critical and reflective work inside the Museum led to reformulating of the Museum's mission; from that point onwards the mission was to *establish foundations for what could make us a certain community in action* (p. 32), taking into account both 'internal Museum's' actors, and those from outside the institution. Adopting the actually non-essential assumption that the residents of Sulejówek and the area around it are one of the Museum's most important target groups, led to implementing numerous projects aimed at both involving the community and at amassing knowledge of the community's features, needs, and ways of thinking. Among those projects (discussed in 'The Vanguard', and meticulously listed in the 'Calendar' placed in the further part of the volume) there is also an in-field investigation conducted in cooperation with the Maria Grzegorzewska University.

As succinctly said by Nessel-Lukasik, the proposed concept is based on the assumption that the *social environment of the institution is one of the Museum's tasks* (p. 33): not a part of the institution's conditioning, of the context creating its potential opportunities to benefit from, or hindrances to overcome, but precisely tasks. This means that mutual relations are multi-directional: the environment creates conditions for Museum's operations, yet the Museum also has a reciprocal impact on the environment, and as a result it is responsible, to a degree, and among others, for the community's well-being, e.g., identification of its problems and needs, proposing responses to them. In the case of Sulejówek one of such needs was to gain space which could fulfil the function of a *social centre* daily-used by residents missing in the town (p. 35). Aiming at trustworthy relations which would enable the Museum to fill in the missing element, thus would assign to the Museum space a totally different role, the Museum's creators explored, among others, the possibility to carry out participatory work on the local collective memory (this clearly illustrated by the co-creation of the Sulejówek Social Archives).

This genealogy of the Sulejówek 'relational museum' is presented in the book as a kind of a dialogue: Nessel-Lukasik's historical-practical approach is complemented with Byszewski's paper titled 'Close to (on a Relational Museum)' whose Author adopts a slightly more general and more theoretical perspective. What turns out to be in his view the most important inspiration for a relational museum is community art, while the very museum activity adopts the form of art: understood in the categories of experimenting, participation, and negotiating, in order to imagine through a museum new versions of the future (and make them feasible).

Byszewski's paper to a degree assumes the character of a peculiar meditation over the key concepts and associations that derive from them, which is visible at two points: firstly, when he analyses the threshold (of a house and of a museum) as a real point in space, but also as a metaphor cumulating various senses of combining spaces, of overcoming barriers, of changes. Secondly, when the 'stepping over the threshold' leads his disquisition to considering the category of the encounter, through actually linguistic (or poetical) means, through amassing a dictionary collecting



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various meanings and collocations of the verb 'to meet'. (As a matter of fact, in this context it is possible to question the appropriateness of the paper's title: the Author gives various meanings of closeness connoted through the preposition 'close to'; he, however, does not pay attention to the sense of someone being 'close to' when we want to emphasize that they are not 'together with', 'involved in'. The relational museum and its neighbours would have to overcome that tendency for to be 'close to' understood in this way).

Anyway, all this leads Byszewski to outlining the vision of the operation of a 'new museum', namely a relational museum with reference to the known concept of a museum-forum. He writes: *in a relational museum such categories as a museum object, canon, or exhibition do not play any more such an important role. We speak less about museum education, and more about creative situations. Instead of disseminating, we deal with participation. (...) In this way a museum becomes a place for collecting individual experience in*

which attention is directed not only to the object, but also to a person (pp. 56-57). It is particularly worth focusing at this point on the issue of overcoming barriers connected with the conviction of the potential participants of such actions that a museum is something 'not for them'. The very predisposition to become involved even in the most open project (to co-create it!) will generally be associated with a cultural, social, and class privilege, thus unintentional consolidating of the existing hierarchies and exclusions is a trap that a relational museum should seek to avoid.

The discussed papers create the main presentation space for the concept of a relational museum which has emerged in the course of the work of the Sulejówek museum curators; they provide an introduction to its assumptions, inspirations, and development stages. These essays are complemented with the papers gathered in the final section of the volume. The first of them is 'Barometer' by Nessel-Łukasik. Its title refers to perceiving a museum as a gauge which

reflects the dynamics of changes occurring in its ecosystem, it registers processes which occur in the neighbourhood (p. 135). The activity of a relational museum is thus a cognition source, investigative activity, while at this point the Author discusses its results: all that could be found out about the social environment of the Museum, relations, and communities around the Museum, in Sulejówek and in its vicinity on the grounds of the projects described in the volume. Thanks to it three *images of the local communities grouped around the Sulejówek Museum* (p. 125) have been created. The key word to the first of them is memory: thanks to interviews material has been collected showing what images from the past are evoked by the spot at which the Museum is currently located. One of the distinguished memory variants is connected with supralocal, national, and patriotic models, concentrating on Piłsudski's figure; others are based on individual emotions connected mainly with private recollections of the individuals who went to the kindergarten located at the Milusin manor complex, currently property of the Museum, which operated there for almost 50 years after WWII. The second distinguished kind of community becomes organized precisely around a place (in this case interesting conclusions emerge with respect to the public's expectations of a museum institution, depending on how close to the museum the investigated group live); the third distinguishing factor is the community of the word: stemming from the in-field research in which the participants created a verbalized portrait of Sulejówek.

The remaining 'supplements' are of a summing up character. The first of them is an interview with Nessel-Lukasik and Byszewski titled 'Emptiness' conducted by Bogna Świątkowska, President of the Bęc Zmiana Foundation and expert on public space. In it returns to the above-discussed issues are clarified: the initial phase of 'inventing' the Piłsudski Museum as well as difficulties with establishing contacts with the local community (and overcoming them thanks to the concentration on shared 'neighbourly' memory), inspiration derived from art and counter-culture, attempts to combine at least two, different to a certain degree, museum models: historical and relational (participatory, museum-forum opening opportunities for its users' causative activity).

Furthermore, an interesting motif related to a potential appropriation of such an institution as the Piłsudski Museum (by, as cautiously phrased by Świątkowska, *different forces*, p. 147) in the context of contemporary historical and memory policies is also articulated here. Indeed, let me add at this point: the very Sulejówek permanent exhibition on the one hand can be treated as a natural space for celebrating Polish identity and patriotism, for consolidating the narrative focusing on Polish successes and merits, as approval of Piłsudski as the commander and 'father of the nation'. On the other hand, it goes beyond the simplifying main-stream consensus on the memory of Piłsudski, which is most obvious in the factual and extensive approach to his Socialist and revolutionary activity which within the framework of this consensus, differently than in the Museum, is often 'just in case' transferred to the background in order so as not to undermine the coherence of the anti-Communist message of patriotic education. (This latter motif is also visible in the

introduction to the *Relational Museum* in which Supel denies the general conviction that Piłsudski *got off the red tramway at the 'Independence' stop, when in reality he never did, this best testified to by the comparison of the agenda (...) of the Polish Socialist Party with the decrees of the Chief of State* (pp. 10-11).

The Museum has thus to cautiously balance between these two different visions of memory and henceforth derived images of the community. According to the Museum's creators, a kind of a safety valve protecting it against the above-mentioned appropriation is precisely the prioritization of neighbourhood and locality among the principles of constructing the institution's programme (which also translates into showing Piłsudski himself as a neighbour of Sulejówek residents, from the every-day life perspective). The same openness of the relational museum which could make it vulnerable to a seizure under unfavourable circumstances thus becomes the source of hope. This openness is also referred to by the 'emptiness' from the mysterious title of the interview: the point is that a relational museum can never be finished and completed, since it is this 'open space', *left outside the control of curators and organizers*, enabling a multidirectional cooperation (p. 151) that is of key importance here.

The last paper in the volume differs from the remaining ones with an external perspective: it is an essay by Iwona Kurz, a culture expert from the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw, unaffiliated to the Piłsudski Museum. Placing it against the background of other Polish museums created as a part of the contemporary boom in Polish museums, Kurz says that what distinguishes it is a kind of a protest against universalization of museums: as an institution addressing its message equally to all, and whose location within a definite physical space is exclusively of a 'technical character'. The protest is concretized through the *Museum's social programme (...) which can be treated as a laboratory of stimulating and consolidating the local community* (p. 162). When describing the Sulejówek social programme, Kurz refers it to three basic temporal planes showing, first of all, how it combines three different memories and histories, which leads to pluralization of the past and discourse of heritage. Secondly, the acceptance of shaping the current wellbeing of this community as a part of the Museum's mission stays coherent, as the researcher shows, both with the valid ICOM museum definition and with the key present-day tendencies in humanities, particularly with the aspiration to locate and de-hierarchize knowledge. Thirdly, a similarly conceived museum is defined through its utility for the future *harmonious functioning* of the community which, as emphasized by Kurz, has to be understood broadly, also not exclusively within the human perspective (p. 167). In this way, not only is the whole book closed up, but it is summed up in an opening expression of hope for a *joyful and reviving* (p. 167) future of a museum as an institution, place, and community.

However, closing at this point the discussion of the discourse of the *Relational Museum* (and the concept of a relational museum) would be a significant impoverishment. Apart from the above-enumerated texts of discursive character and of quite a standard format of papers or essays,

the volume is filled with, so to say, 'non-texts': differently composed fragments, using various text type fragments talking about the actions of the above-mentioned Museum's programmes over the years. And so throughout the whole book texts and visual charts called 'collections' can be encountered: they do not amass exhibits, but questions, concepts, statements of participants of subsequent projects, which all led to the formulation of the idea of a relational museum. There appear 13 such collections: the first is titled 'Questions' (e.g., 'Can You Look at a Place as a Knot?', 'Why Go to a Museum?', pp. 40-41), the last showing the *multidimensional image created out of many images and expectations* (p. 155) of the Museum's public, deduced from their reports, what they thought about when leaving home for the Museum, and how they would answer the question where the Museum's stairs lead (e.g., *nowhere, to fulfil desires, to a dark undiscovered place absorbing ordinary people with their greatness*; p. 155). Among them there are e.g., such collections: *Nostalgic Landscape*, *Smell Landscape*, *Acoustic Landscape* (fragments of the recollections of the Sulejówek kindergarten), and collections of responses to frequently creative tasks proposed to the participants of workshops organized by the Museum while it was being created.

Furthermore, the text-visual-photographic essays compiled by Byszewski are of a similar character; collected within the 'Triptych', they refer to three major projects implemented with the community in 2016–2020, thus before opening the Museum to the public: *I'm Standing in front of a Strange Tube...*, *Multitude of Realities (Exhibition about us and the Museum)*, and *Panorama – Situation*. The presented text is of a fragmentary, impressive, sketchy character, and maybe it could be read as poetical accounts (e.g., *Recordings / Memory / Recording Number Increases / We Establish the First Relations / I'm Standing in front of a Strange Tube... / A Sound Quote / Piłsudski's Voice / 'Kindergarten Kids' Voices / We're Recording, Too*; p. 72). In order to identify the course of those actions, the elements contained in the *Triptych* should be assembled into one whole (or more appropriately: cross-linked); the same should apply to those contained in respective collections, the 'Calendar', and also in the mentions in the content of the papers collected in the volume. Additionally, the sources marked in bibliographies which link to the more traditional systemized descriptions of given projects and their theoretical background published in the press as well as specialized books can be accessed. In this way the publication serving to present an

open relational idea of a museum co-created by the community has been, most adequately, prepared in such a way that it requires particular activity and decisiveness from its readers. As a result, differing images of the process which led to the emergence of this idea will be created, and this will once again set the relational museum in motion.

Amidst all the texts and non-texts contained in the volume numerous illustrations have been fitted: photos of the Sulejówek Museum (of both the whole complex and small details of its buildings) as well as some derived from the photographic documentation of the above-mentioned projects. Those rhythmically placed interludes are additionally emphasized by the fact that they are preceded by almost empty 'pages-thresholds': cut across by a thick horizontal line from behind which the inscription: 'threshold' partially looms. Thus, when passing from one part of the book to the other, from one perspective of the relational museum to the other, we cross subsequent 'thresholds' participating in a meeting and change. The author of this impressive layout is Mariusz Libel, a major visual artist active in public space (who has cooperated with the Piłsudski Museum on several occasions before). The overall design is complemented with a peculiar 'logo of the book': this very simple sign composed of two overlapping rectangles appears in dozens of variants of the figure sizes and points at which they crisscross almost on every page, on the cover, in the background of all the pages with the standard text printed on (as contours not hampering the reading), between the chapters, on the final page.

The two rectangles may be an association with the outline of the new Museum building, alternatively being a combination of that building with the older facilities, with various elements of the plan of the whole complex. First of all, however, owing to the change of shapes and illusion of movement, they become a clear metaphor of the dynamic relations: between the Museum and the community/neighbours, Museum's interior and exterior, memory and the present, etc. This successful visual summary of the book once again encourages the reader to cooperate, which is the foundation of the proposed relationality. Once again does it emphasize the coherent character of the proposed museum model and hope that it is trying to instil. No matter how Utopian this vision may seem with respect to the institution which preserves the characteristics of a historical museum with the key role of a permanent exhibition, it also delineates a promising horizon for thinking about extending and transforming this vision's potential.

Abstract: The paper is a review of the book by Janusz Byszewski and Beata Nessel-Lukasik *Muzeum relacyjne. Przed progiem / za progiem [Relational Museum. Before the Threshold/Beyond the Threshold]* inaugurating the 'Museology: New Places' series. It discusses in more detail the title project and the assumed relational museum which in its authors'

understanding is characterized by the focus on the relations of a museum as an institution with the local community, based on a rich social programme, co-created with museum's external actors on an equal-footing basis. Both the volume's content and its experimental stylistic, with a special focus on its graphic layout are discussed.

Keywords: relational museum, Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek, participation, neighbourhood.

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