



Editorial. The Museum as a Research Hub

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Editorial. The Museum as a Research Hub

Vlad Strukov

This issue of *The Garage Journal* is the first instalment in the three-step intervention. The second is the international conference 'Utopias of (Non) Knowledge: The Museum as a Research Hub,' held at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art on the 24-25th of September, the same dates the issue has been launched. And finally, the third instalment will be a collection of essays to be published in Russian in 2022. The focus and scope of the collection will be determined at a later stage.

The purpose of this intervention is to consider how research is integrated into museums' future strategies, to reflect on how collaborations among researchers, artists, and curators work, and outline the key applications of practice-based research. In fact, the conference aims to explore Jacques Rancière's notion of (non)knowledge and the ways in which it problematizes the hierarchical regime of the unidirectional transfer of knowledge from one subject to another. By criticizing the neoliberal production and commodification of knowledge in this way, he reminds us that the purpose of democracy is to attain equality, and in particular the equality of knowledge. In this system, knowledge and non-knowledge are employed as different modes of knowing, not as fixed knowledge and its denial. What he offers instead can be described as a modernist model of a 'knowledge utopia,' where all citizens are equal and therefore equally involved in practices of (not) knowing. The model suggested by Rancière allows the conference participants to reconsider the role that museums play in the creation, transfer, and preservation of knowledge.

In the second half of the twentieth century, museums faced the need to review the foundations of their activity. As a result of this transformative process, they became increasingly focused on research activities: the practices of creating and distributing (non)knowledge. While research has informed museum practices since the emergence of museums, in recent years museums have begun organizing collaborative projects with researchers, including from governmental and business institutions and scientific laboratories, as well as with independent artists and others. These interactions allow us to speak of special—horizontal—modes of knowledge production and exchange that create a new understanding of the museum as a hub.

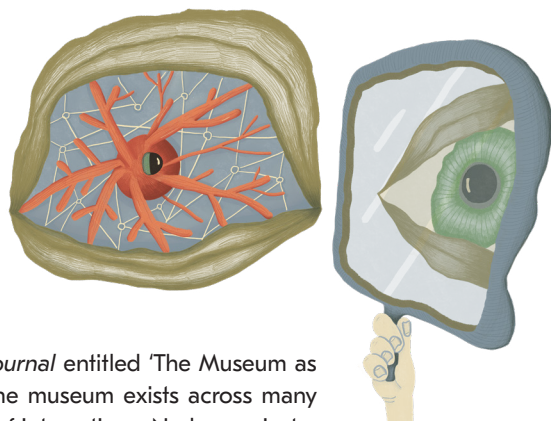


Figure 1. Illustration by Katia Barinova (2021)

This special issue of *The Garage Journal* entitled 'The Museum as a Research Hub' recognizes that nowadays the museum exists across many sites, in multiple times, and through a myriad of interactions. No longer just a gallery filled with objects and accompanying notes, the museum is involved in the politics of what is to be visible in the twenty-first century. We understand visibility as a form of presence in the public discourse, a form of knowing and remembering. The museum increasingly recognizes visibility as a power to build associations, networks, and communities. The special issue considers critically how these new powers are invested in curatorial practices and how they are invoked in the contemporary and historical settings. We put the visitors at the center of our consideration, including their participation in the process of re-defining the purpose and scope of research in the museum.

The questions that this special issue will ask include (but are not limited to):

- What are the changes that the museum's research culture has seen over the past decades? How are they transforming the museum's role in society?
- How exactly do museums, especially art museums, carry out research?
- How do different kinds of museums—the art museum, the historical museum, the memory museum, and the museum of contemporaneity—respond to recent theoretical advances?
- What makes research in the museum 'practice-based research'?
- How do museums make research accessible?
- What are the best practices in terms of co-researching with artists, audiences, and others involved in museums?
- How can research in museums contribute to social innovation and change?
- And finally, what potential does re-conceptualizing the museum as a research hub provide?

In order to address these concerns, the materials selected for the special issue focus on the question of method, which allows a new conceptualization of the museum as a research hub. The idea of the museum as method has been discussed by Nicholas Thomas (2010) and by Philipp Schorch and Conal McCarthy (2019). Both works—a comment and a volume of essays—call for a departure from the previous colonial system of organization and presentation of knowledge in the museum. Indeed, the

editors of *Curatopia* (Schorch and McCarthy 2019) re-published Thomas's 2010 essay as the opening work for their volume in order to emphasize the need to de-colonize the museum and knowledge. Thomas writes that 'the spaces of, and between, museums and anthropology today are full of paradoxes. Museums cannot escape the association of anachronism, they connote colonial dustiness' (2019: 19). According to Thomas, the notion of the museum as method consists in the process of de-colonization of knowledge and the event of discovery. He proposes juxtaposition as the main method of organization of objects in the museum. He notes that 'one can work with contingencies, with the specific qualities and histories of artifacts and works of art, in ways that challenge many every day or scholarly understandings of what things are and what they represent' (Thomas 2010: 8).

The authors of this special issue support Thomas's imperative to decolonize knowledge and the museum. They also go a step farther in their conceptualization of the museum method. It is no longer just about re-interpretation of different objects and the use of juxtaposition when displaying them. It is also about querying the very ways in which we know things and in which we relate to different systems of knowledge production, placing the museum at the core of these processes. As a result, the museum as method emerges as a way to think beyond the disciplines and pre-determined methodologies.

In recent research—both in universities and museums—inter- and multi-disciplinary studies have been celebrated. They have relied on re-combinations of disciplines and borrowings from multiple disciplines such as art history, sociology, digital culture, visual culture, and discourse analysis. Indeed, the contributors to the special issue make use of a wide range of methods, including archival work, textual analysis, visual analysis, data analysis, interviews, discourse analysis, and so on. They also pay special attention to the collaborative aspect of research in addition to comparative analysis. They critically engage in self-reflexion, including methods such as introspection, embodied research, performance, and speculative research. However, in all the contributions the authors query these inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches, calling for a new system of knowledge production.

In response to the question posed by the authors of this special issue, I propose to think about research in the museum in the post-disciplinary fashion, namely, not to apply an existing discipline or a method but to grow it organically from the context. In my formulation, the post-disciplinary approach dictates that the context becomes the method, thus blurring the boundaries between objects and spaces and between different subjectivities engaged in the production of knowledge.

This type of method can be realized in a particular setting, that of a hub, hence the title of the issue. In contemporary use, one meaning of the term hub is apparent in this example, 'a central airport or other transport facility from which many services operate'. However, the term has two other important meanings that are actualized in the issue of *The Garage Journal*, the first is that of the central part of a wheel, rotating on or with the axle,

and from which the spokes radiate. It places the museum as the center of research. Hence, the museum is no longer peripheral to research activities, and its collections and activities are not determined by the requirements of universities. And the other meaning is that of 'the effective center of an activity, region, or network' (center of activity, core, heart, focal point, nucleus, nerve center). In this regard, the idea of a network is extremely important, and it also enables the use of context as method through a relationship among different elements of the network.

Thinking about the museum as a research hub allows for a conceptualization of the museum as a fluid system with a set of values which are constantly evolving, not as a place with pre-determined structures and boundaries. This type of museum advances horizontal connections leading to the democratization of knowledge. Through the convergence of discourses, recursive analyses, and intercultural exchanges, the museum stops being a discipline, a (professional) activity or a type of 'curatopia' (Schorch and McCarthy 2019) and instead emerges as a mode. Above I suggested that knowledge and non-knowledge should be considered as a mode of knowing, here I wish to suggest that the museum be considered as a mode of knowing, too. To paraphrase Rancière writing about the politics of aesthetics (2010: 10), the museum is 'a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposes a certain idea of thought's effectivity).'

Figure 2. Illustration by Katia Barinova (2021)



In the spirit of working with the museum as a mode, this theoretical introduction to the issue was authored in collaboration with illustrator Katia Barinova. She worked with some preliminary conceptualizations aiming to visualize the key notions—the method and the hub—producing, in the end, her own concepts of the museum as a research hub (see figures 1 and 2). I thank her for her queries and suggestions, and for being able to respond to my obscure ideas. I also wish to thank those who have contributed immensely to the conceptualization and realization of the special issue, the journal's editors and advisory board. I am grateful to Ekaterina Inozemtseva, chief curator at Garage, who served as a consultant on the issue. Needless to say, my biggest thanks go to the contributors to the issue who have responded to the open call for submissions. Their contributions challenge the status quo in museum studies and supply an assessment of practices in the global setting. I also invite the reader to explore publications in GJ Media which also touch upon the theme of the issue. The latter—alongside the conference and the special issue—launch a discussion about the museum as a research hub which I hope will spark future debates, too.



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Author's bio

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