

**The Museum as an Educational Entity:
The Performative Transformation of Places into Spaces**

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Abstract Summary

Museum professionals (curators and educators) are inclined to focus their educational programs on the interpretation of artworks, exhibitions, and collections while ignoring the educational potential of the museum in its entirety. This study explores the educational consequences of interpreting the entire museum as if it were one complex artwork. Its aim was to challenge the traditional notions of a museum's educational dimensions and to offer a more comprehensive view of museum education.

To do this, I conducted a semiotic study of four internationally known museums: the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts and the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. My research approach was partly based on Victor Burgin's narration of the performative practices of a flâneur experiencing a Japanese department store; in the same manner as the flâneur I opportunistically read the museums and their places, as a visitor-reader, in order to transform them into educational spaces. Concomitantly, I used four critical lenses for interpretation and examination of the museums to enact this process of transformation: (a) the museum and its contents as evidence of culture; (b) the museum as history; (c) the museum as location, architectural design, and exhibition, and (d) the museum as a system of power and ideology, incorporating political, social, and economic factors.

My research questions were: (1) If the art museum is a place (or a set of places) and "a system of signs," then what might these signs tell us about the museum? Are these signs educationally significant? If so, how do these signs function educationally? (2) If a museum-as-object, or place, were treated as a work of art and transformed into spaces through visitors' interpretations, then what insights might these spaces reveal about history, culture, society, economics, national tendencies, and ideologies? How might the aforementioned museums reveal these aspects in similar and in different ways? (3) If we were to see museums as places, and some visitors were not unlike a flâneur, in what possible ways might these places be transformed into spaces? What might these transformations mean to the flâneur? How might museum professionals help museum visitors build their power of knowledge?

In this study, I discovered that it is through performing critical interpretations of the museum that we transform museum places into individually meaningful spaces. Namely, we write our life stories into the museums' academic narratives. Both museum professionals (directors, curators, and educators) and visitors need to see museums as performative spaces in which critical dialogic exchange takes place

between the museum's and the visitors' interpretations of the museum. Therefore, it is important for museum professionals to reevaluate their current educational role and methodologies in order to provide an effective learning environment for their museum visitors. It is equally important for museum visitors to encourage and empower themselves to share the authorship of interpreting museums and their contents. In this study, I found that a more effective museum education would be based on a visitor-centered communication approach and constructivist educational theories. Thus, I suggest a constructivist museum pedagogy as a model for providing a more comprehensive museum education.

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