

How do institutions choreograph us?

A half-day symposium exploring visitor movement in art institutional spaces

20 June 2023, ICA Theatre

PROPOSAL

I am inviting artists, researchers and museum and gallery professionals to contribute to a day of thinking through practice on the way visitors move in institutions, and how institutions move. Through individual contributions, group activities and discussions, we will work towards a collective understanding of how artistic practice around movement may inform institutional practice.

I connect this invite to the wider discourse on choreography as a methodology and a system of production of knowledge, rather than it being strictly connected to dance. This theoretical framework sets out that movement is a way of thinking, and the way we move directly reflects our thoughts and ideas. For example, on entering an art gallery or museum, our movement as visitors reflect our intellectual journey. Equally, the way the objects are displayed, the encounter with other people, the overall architecture, and the verbal and aural elements of the space, all shape our movement through them.

Furthermore, in art and cultural institutions, the physical presence of bodies in space is always political. I draw on the idea of 'spatial practice' to think about how the interaction between bodies, objects and architecture in a public space formulates and re-formulates relationships. It also has the power to reinforce and, otherwise, disrupt narratives. As part of these, a constant negotiation of identity, including the categories of gender, sexual identity and race, is played out.

My idea of 'institutional practice' draws on Henri LeFebvre's *The Production of Space* (1979), and Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1989). Le Febvre specifically talks about the everyday practiced of working in an office as a way to perpetuate social inequality and power relations. I am interested in seeing how this concept applies to working in an art institution, and what everyday gestures, actions, decisions, behaviours contribute to the social inequality present in art institutions today.

Starting from these premises, I invite the symposium contributors to respond or reflect on (I.) the proposition that museums and gallery visitors' movement is directed by implicit or explicit choreographic 'scores' and, further from that, how visitor agency to comply with or dissent from these scores is manifested or deployed during their visit. Simultaneously,

contributors may respond to (II.) the question of how the practice of working in an institution contributes to perpetuate social inequality, not only in the way the institution communicates with the public, but also in the internal practices of administration and governance, and how it is otherwise possible to produce change through or beyond these practices.

The ideas below may act as point of reflection for contributors. However, other ways of accessing or breaking down the theme of the symposium are welcome.

I. Specifically in relation to visitor movement:

Tangible scores

Signs and maps, verbal and physical information given by front-of-house staff, labels and panels, the arrangement of the objects on display, the overall architecture of the space, act as choreographic 'instructions'. They tell us how to move around, where to go first, where to look or 'what to do' with the artwork. They direct our gaze and, consequently, our thought.

Spatial Narratives

There are also implicit narratives inherent to museums and galleries. These spaces are permeated by White, patriarchal and colonial narratives. This influences how bodies behave or feel within these spaces. Some cues of these narratives are evident, some less, and nonetheless present.

The body keeps the score

There are also silent choreographies inscribed in our bodies, based on our personal experience and our ideas on the space and its narratives. These internalised scores, again, are a fundamental part of our experience of the artwork or artefacts.

II. In relation to how institutions 'move', and institutional practice:

Spatial practices of visiting and racial (in)justice

The effort in museology and museum practice towards 'inclusion' since the late 1980s and 1990s, proposes a dynamic of 'inviting others' into a space that is not essentially meant for them, therefore ultimately reproducing inequality. As Sara Ahmed puts it, 'To be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home' (Ahmed, S. 2012).

Following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and renewed discourse about decolonising institutions, many museums and galleries professed their renewed intent to revise their policies and practices towards anti-racism and social equality. A considerable element of this is increasing the diversity of audiences. Three years on from declarations of anti-racist

intents, I invite the symposium participants to check in on what are the possibilities of change beyond these often-unfulfilled declarations of good intentions.

Visitor Research

One of the strategies used in museums and galleries to evaluate visitors' engagement with programmes and exhibitions focuses on movement and physicality: it consists of observing and recording visitor pathways, direction of 'flow', time spent in front of each exhibit. This practice has strong links with choreographic notation. Like in performance, this method, derived from ethnographic and sociological practices, also poses questions on the positioning of the observant and the observed in a power dynamic.

Other evaluation strategies include visitor surveys are a common practice to monitor, research and develop audiences, and this includes recording their ethnicity and gender. We will particularly look into these methods and discuss their ethics and politics.

CONTRIBUTORS:

I aim to promote a dialogue between different approaches: creative, academic, administrative-operational. I embrace the challenge that may arise from combining contributors from such different perspectives.