

Book Review

Review of Katarzyna Jagodzińska, *Participation and the Post-Museum* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2025)

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Participation has been a public history buzzword for several years, and various scholars have approached the topic either critically or enthusiastically. Published by Routledge in 2025, the book “Participation and the Post-Museum” is an important voice from the non-English speaking part of the world, democratizing museum scholarship by including Polish museums in the international academic discourse. The author, Katarzyna Jagodzińska, is the leading scholar researching museum participation in Poland. She is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and has published widely on museums and museum participation. Jagodzińska’s book draws upon the many research projects she has conducted over several years dedicated to deepening our understanding of museum participation. The author has, among other projects, carried out interviews with numerous museum professionals on the topic of their participatory projects and practices.

The book consists of six self-contained chapters that have little overlap, as each covers either a theoretical framework or offers a case study drawing on different analytical approaches and methodologies. Yet, while Jagodzińska provides much rich material, the book sometimes struggles with cohesion with the chapters feeling more like standalone essays than part of a single argument.

Chapters one and six offer the key theoretical frameworks that the book revolves around, centered around questions of participation associated with museums and the democratizing nature of such practices. The first chapter, “Museum Frameworks: Where does the concept of participation fit in?” examines theoretical frameworks for museums and participation. The concept of the post-museum, which is part of the book’s title, refers to an institution that produces fragmented and multivocal knowledge and devotes much attention to building relationships with people. The most influential theoretical element for the whole concept of the book seems to be the typology by Ellora Puri who distinguishes between efficiency-based and agency-based participation.

The final chapters of the book further explore and reflect upon the definitions and theoretical reflections

discussed in previous chapters. In the last chapter, “Reaching beyond a definition,” the author discusses the issue of the nature of museums themselves, based on the process of adopting a new museum definition. The last chapter functions then not as a traditional conclusion, but rather as an open exploration of various themes, ending with Jagodzińska proposing the idea of a “Cross Museum:” a practice of sharing resources of various museums to create out-of-the-box problem-oriented exhibitions.

The author comprehensively puts together scholarly work regarding museums and various other fields to build a theoretical framework for the book, however the lack of cohesiveness is visible when analyzing the two theoretical chapters. In the closing chapter Jagodzińska barely references ideas from the introductory chapter and does not directly answer whether or not participation belongs in a museum, despite stating that this question is one that underpins the whole book. That said, because the book is intended to be exploratory rather than prescriptive, this is part of its value.

Where the theoretical chapters pose broad questions, the case studies ground these debates in concrete institutional practices, revealing both the possibilities and the limits of participation. The case study chapters center around a main idea or problem which is summarized in their titles. The second chapter, “Museums made by local communities: When grassroots energy clashes with bureaucracy,” explores two case studies of museums grounded in locality. These case studies provide an in-depth analysis of participatory practices by exploring how bureaucracy impacts grassroots projects. The third chapter, “Can we really call it power sharing?,” focuses on several participatory projects carried out in art, history, and ethnography museums. The overarching theme of this chapter, as suggested in the title, is the dichotomy between museums as democratic or authoritarian spaces, and the question of real and superficial power-sharing. The fourth chapter, “An insight into power relations between the museum and the community,” is based on the author’s own participatory project of creating exhibitions drawing upon an extensive toy collection of the Sosenko family within the framework of “The Toy Museum.” Here, Jagodzińska describes in detail the process of creating several exhibitions that were based on the concept of curatorial dreaming: imagining exhibitions by scholars, who are then inspired by their research and critical concerns to creatively put theory into practice. The fifth and last of the case study chapters explores strategies adopted by museums to become leaders of change in their surroundings. Jagodzińska positions this topic in the sphere of museum activism and ways for museums to stay relevant, as

well as the 2016 ICOM resolution on “The Responsibility of Museum Towards Landscape.”

Together, these case studies provide valuable insight into the complexities of participation. Despite community involvement in founding some institutions, the institutional burden weakens close relations with the public. Participation often remains marginal, failing to democratize museum spaces in a meaningful way. As Jagodzińska notes, Polish museums rarely become involved in matters happening in their environment because they are not yet ready to collaborate with external partners.

Jagodzińska makes clear arguments, cites a wide range of scholarship, and reaches for practices from various fields. She approaches the actors present in her narratives with empathy and a critical edge. She also introduces innovative ideas: the Toy Museum project, which experimented with curatorial freedom in a museum without a permanent space, and the CrossMuseum proposal, which envisions inter-institutional collaboration. Both stand out as creative contributions that could inspire future projects, even as they expose the compromises and constraints inherent in participatory practices.

The main argument of the book that emerges despite the fragmented feel of the self-contained chapters – that museums are not in fact compatible with participatory practices – is a sentiment appearing more often in recent literature. After enthusiastically embracing participatory practices a decade ago, museums are now reflecting on the idea and rethinking their approach. Jagodzińska’s book is an interesting addition to this conversation that resists giving easy answers. In fact, the book reads more like a series of exploratory essays that are there to inspire, rather than give answers, which was, after all, the author’s stated goal from the outset.

While *Participation and the Post-Museum* makes a valuable contribution to the international conversation

on museum participation, some aspects could benefit from further clarification. In particular, Jagodzińska frequently invokes the notion of “true participation” without fully defining what this entails. The reader is left to infer that it represents a scenario in which the public is entrusted with significant curatorial agency, supported by broad institutional resources. Yet this model risks appearing idealized, since museums must operate within real-world limits. As a result, the book sometimes seems to measure actual participatory practices against a standard that is seemingly impossible to realize. The argument might have been strengthened by a clearer articulation of what levels of participation are realistically attainable. In this way, the book could have bridged the gap between visionary thinking and everyday institutional practice more effectively.

Ultimately, Jagodzińska offers a thought-provoking reflection rather than a roadmap. For scholars, her work raises critical questions and situates Polish case studies within a wider theoretical frame. For practitioners, however, the absence of more concrete guidance may prove limiting. Yet perhaps that is precisely the point: to unsettle assumptions and to resist easy answers.

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